

Turning Suffering and Happiness into Enlightenment

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Homage to Arya Avolokiteshvara by the recollection of his qualities which were celebrated thus:

He who will ever be made happy by the happiness of others,
And who feels extreme distress when suffering comes to them,
Having fully attained the quality of great compassion,
He will renounce his own happiness and sufferings.

I am going to write a partial instruction on acceptance of happiness and suffering as the Path. It is the most precious teaching in the world, and a necessary tool for the holy life.

The Way of Accepting Suffering as the Path to Enlightenment:

1. By Means of the Relative Truth

Whenever harm comes to you from beings or non-beings, if your mind experiences on the consciousness of sorrow, then even from a small incident great mental pain will develop. For it is its nature that any consciousness, either of suffering or happiness, will increase by experiencing it. If the experience gradually becomes stronger, a time will come when most of what appears will become the cause of drawing unhappiness to ourselves, and happiness will never have a chance. If you do not know that the responsibility lies within one's own mind's way of experiencing and you put the blame on external objects alone, then the ceaseless flame of suffering and anger – bad karma – will increase. This is called appearances arising in the form of the enemy.

You should thoroughly understand that the reason why sentient beings of the dark age are afflicted by suffering is fundamentally related to the weakness of their discriminating awareness. Therefore, not to be hurt by the obstacles of enemies, illness, and harmful spirits does not mean that we can drive away vicissitudes such as illness and that they will not occur again. Rather, it means that they will not be able to arise and take the form of obstacles to the practice of the Path to enlightenment.

In order for this to come about, you should practice in the following two ways:

(i) Reject the state of mind exclusively desiring not to have suffering.

Ascertain again and again the uselessness and harmfulness of considering suffering as something unfavorable, and be aware of how much anxiety you experience from aversion to it. Train yourself to develop great courage, and experience powerfully the thought that from now on, whatever suffering comes, I shall not be anxious.

a) The uselessness of considering suffering as something unfavorable:

If you can cure the suffering, then you do not need to be unhappy; if you cannot change it, there is no benefit from being unhappy about it.

b) The great harm of considering suffering as something unfavorable:

If you do not feel anxious, your strength of mind can help you to bear even great sufferings easily. They feel light and flimsy like cotton. Because of anxiety, you are ceaselessly oppressed by unhappy feelings, and even small sufferings are intolerable.

For example, while you are thinking of a beautiful man or woman, even if you try to get rid of desire, you will only exhaust yourself. Likewise, by concentrating on the painful characteristics of suffering, you cannot develop patience. So, as in the case of the instructions on sealing the doors of the faculties, you should not concentrate your mind on the characteristics of suffering, but you should become experiences in keeping your mind in its normal conditions and in its own state.

(ii) Develop the attitude of being happy that sufferings arise.

Practice cultivating joy by considering suffering as an aid to the Path. Whenever suffering arises, you must have a virtuous practice to apply to it, according to the ability of your mind, because it will be difficult to succeed if you only ponder the general principle that a spiritual method can bring certain benefits from suffering as a support to practice. As it is said: “That is farther than the earth from the sky.”

(a) Suffering as the support of training in the thought of turning away from samsara:

Think that as long as you are wandering powerless in samsara, suffering does not arise as something unjust, but that the nature of samsara is like that. Reflect that if it is difficult to bear even the little sufferings of the happy realms, there is nothing to be said about the lower realms. Develop sadness by thinking that, “Alas, samsara is an endless and unfathomable ocean of suffering”, and turn your mind to liberation.

(b) Suffering as the support of training in taking refuge:

Practice taking refuge by gaining certainty that the three jewels are the only unbetraying refuge amidst the continuous suffering of fear and danger throughout the succession of your lives, so that you should depend on them in all ways, not renouncing them in any circumstances.

(c) Suffering as the support of training in dispelling arrogance:

Annihilate pride and contempt for others, which are the destructive enemies of merits, by becoming aware that one has no freedom, one has not passed beyond the control of suffering.

(d) Suffering as the support for purification of negative karma:

The suffering you have experienced, and sufferings that are unimaginably numerous and severe, all arise from the defilements alone. So think carefully about these four principles:

The certainty of the operation of karma.

Then tendency of karma to increase greatly.

You will not encounter the result of what you have not done.

What you have done will not be wasted.

Reflect that if you do not want suffering, then you should renounce the cause of suffering, which is being non-virtuous, purify the previously accumulated defilements by the four powers, and endeavor to prevent future defilements from arising.

(e) Suffering as the support for attraction to virtue:

Reflect that if you desire happiness, which is the opposite of suffering, you should try to practice its cause, which is virtue. Consider thoroughly and at length how to act for the increase of virtue.

- (f) Suffering as the support for training in compassion:
Reflect that, like myself, other sentient beings are also tortured by the same or greater suffering. Train yourself to think how good it would be if they too were to free themselves from all sufferings. By this means, you will also understand the way of practicing loving kindness, which is the intention to help those who are bereft of happiness.
- (g) Taking suffering as the support of the meditation that others are more dear than oneself:
The fact that one is not released from suffering is the result of cherishing oneself from beginningless time. Now you should practice thinking that you will only cherish others, which is the source of happiness and virtue.
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It is very difficult to practice taking suffering as the Path when you actually come face to face with sorrows. So it is important to become familiar in advance with the practices of virtue that are to be applied to unfavorable circumstances. Also, it is best for you to apply a practice of which you have clear experience.

It is not enough simply for suffering to become the support of virtuous practice; you have to realize perfectly that this is what has happened, and you should certainly obtain a strong and stable continuity of joy, which is brought about by that realization.

Any time that you practice what I have unfolded, you should reflect that, by the suffering you experience you are getting a great support for the excellent and manifold joys of the higher realms, and for liberation, difficult to obtain, and that in the future it will come about in this way again. So even if the suffering is severe, it is a supremely agreeable thing: It is like ladu (a sweet) of molasses, mixed with cardamon and pepper.

Think about this again and again, and gain experience of the bliss of the mind. If this happens, the superabundance of mental bliss will make the suffering of the sense faculties as if it were imperceptible. The criterion for illness to be overcome by patience, is that the mind is not able to be harmed by suffering. This also gives you the clue to overcoming enemies and evil spirits as well.

As mentioned above, reversing the thought of dislike for suffering is the foundation of taking suffering as the Path, because while your mind is disturbed and your courage or interest is extinguished by anxiety, you cannot turn suffering into the Path.

By training in taking suffering as the actual Path, you will also improve your capacity for bliss, as mentioned above, because by actually experiencing the increase of virtuous practice through suffering, you will become more and more cheerful. As it is said:

“If you gradually train yourself through small sufferings — by gradual stages — finally you will be able to train yourself in great sufferings as well.” You should act accordingly, for it will be difficult to gain experience through things that are beyond the capacity of your own mind.

In period of withdrawal from meditation, you should pray to the Lama and the three jewels in order to turn suffering into the Path. When your mind has grown a little stronger, after making offerings to the triple gem and the spirits, you should request them to send unfavorable

circumstances, in order that you may receive training in the practice of virtue. You should always have the confidence of happiness and cheerfulness.

When first training, it is important to keep entertainments at a distance. In the midst of entertainments you may be influenced by many bad friends who say, "How can you bear suffering and contempt?" From many worries caused by enemies, relatives and wealth, your mind will be polluted and disturbed beyond control so that you will develop bad habits. In addition, the mind may be diverted by various incidental circumstances. In solitary places, these distractions are not present. There, the mind will be very clear, so that it will be easy to concentrate.

For this reason, when Chöd practitioners do the meditation of controlling sufferings, at first they will avoid directing the practice to the harm caused by men in places of distraction. Instead, they will mainly practice with the apparitions of gods and demons in solitary cemeteries and other wild places.

Briefly, not only so that the mind may be unaffected by bad circumstances and sufferings, but also in order to extract bliss from the vicissitudes themselves, you should stop the arising of aversion to internal illness and outer enemies, evil spirits, and disharmonious speech, and you should accustom yourself to the arising of just the feeling of liking. For this you should cease to view dangerous circumstances as defects, and should train yourself with every effort to view them as valuable.

Whether things are pleasing or not depends upon how they are perceived by the mind. For example, if a person persistently perceives the faults in worldly enjoyments then even if his retinue and wealth increase he will feel all the more sick of them; whereas, if a person perceives worldly enjoyments as beneficial, he will even aspire to increase his prosperity.

By that kind of training:

- the mind will become flexible
- it will have breadth
- you shall be easy to be with, courageous
- you will be free from obstacles to religious practice
- all bad circumstances will arise as noble and fortunate
- the mind will always be satisfied by the bliss of peace

To practice the Path in this dark era, you must not be without armor of this kind. When you are not afflicted by the suffering of anxiety, not only will other sufferings disappear, like weapons dropping from the hands of soldiers; but even illnesses will automatically disappear. The holy ones of the past said:

"By not having an unhappy mind, and by not being discontent about anything, your mind will not be disturbed. When your mind is not disturbed, your wind energies will not be disturbed, in which case other elements of the body will not be disturbed either. Because of this, your mind will not be disturbed and so the wheel of happiness will revolve."

We will gain understanding through sayings like this:

"As birds find it easy to harm horses and donkeys with sores on their backs, evil spirits will easily get a chance to harm those whose nature is fearful. But it will be difficult to harm those whose nature is stable."

Learned people perceive that all happiness and suffering depend upon the mind. So they search for happiness from the mind itself. The causes of happiness are complete within oneself, they are not dependent upon externals. There is nothing to be hurt by any afflictions from beings or non-beings. The same (that one will not be hurt by suffering) will be true at the time of dying, when fear and suffering may arise. One shall always be free. The Bodhisattvas' Samadhi of Pervading all Elements by Happiness is also accomplished by this means.

Foolish people run after external objects, thinking thereby to seek for happiness. Whatever happiness, great or small, they try to gain they will have many failures, such as non-attainments, incompletions, and misjudgments. For, as people say, "Control is in the hands of others – you hair is tangled in a tree." Enemies separated from happiness by a little criticism, and one's state of mind will be unreliable; as when a crow nurses a baby cuckoo. However much it nurtures it, it will be impossible for the cuckoo to become a baby crow. There is nothing that is not tiresome for the gods, miserable for evil spirits, and suffering for oneself.

This essential advice is the confluence of a hundred different points. There are many other ways of acceptance of the suffering of hardships while practicing the path, as taught in shi.byed, etc. but here I am just writing an easily understandable outline of the acceptance of suffering based on the teachings based on the teachings of Shantideva and his learned followers.

2. By Means of the Ultimate Truth

This is the drawing of the mind to supreme peace, and dwelling there by the knowledge of stopping the arising of the four extremes etc.; dwelling in that empty nature in which there is no suffering or unfavorable circumstances, in which even the names (of suffering etc.) cannot be found.

Even when you come out of that state (of supreme peace), the way in which suffering arises in your mind is not the same as before, when fear and apprehension arose. These you must overcome by observing them as being hollow, merely words.

The Way of Taking Happiness as the Path

1. By Means of the Relative Truth

When happiness or objects that cause happiness come to you, if you slip under their control, then pride, arrogance and laziness will increase, and these will obstruct your path. It is difficult not to fall under their control. As Phadampa says: "Men can bear great suffering, but only a little happiness."

For this reason, consider by various methods that all existent things are impermanent and full of suffering. Thus, developing a great lassitude about samsara, turn your mind away from carelessness.

Again, reflect that the wealth and happiness that the world affords are insignificant and are connected with many harmful things, even though some of it has value. Buddha said:

“For a person whose freedom is impaired by suffering, it is very difficult to attain enlightenment; but it will be very easy for a person to achieve enlightenment if he is happy.”

You ought to think: “It is my great fortune to have practiced the Dharma in happiness. Now, whatever the circumstances, I am converting this happiness into Dharma.” Also, from the Dharma, happiness will arise continuously. Thus you should train Dharma and happiness to become the support of one another. Otherwise, like boiling water in a wooden pot, in the end it will become whatever it was before. You should achieve the essential by applying whatever happiness arises to the Dharma. This is the vision of the Ratnavali. Even if you are happy, if you cannot recognize it, it will not become the instrument of Dharma practice. So, as the antidote to hopes for other additional happiness, you should apply the appropriate method and should possess the ambrosia of contentment with whatever you have.

There are other ways to take happiness as the Path based upon the instructions of training in Bodhicitta, and by remembering the kindness of the three jewels, but for the time being this is sufficient. As in accepting suffering as the Path, in the case of happiness also, you should alternate the practices of purification and accumulation of merit in a solitary place.

2. By Means of Ultimate Truth

You will understand happiness taken as the Path, by means of ultimate truth by understanding the previous case.

When you are suffering, if you cannot practice Dharma by means of that sorrow, and when you are happy, if you cannot practice Dharma because of attachment to happiness, then it will be impossible for a chance to practice Dharma to present itself. So if you practice Dharma, there is nothing more essential than this (understanding).

If you have this practice, whatever kind of place you stay in, whether in solitude or in a city; whatever sort of friends you associate with, either good or bad; whatever comes, riches or poverty, happiness or sorrow; whatever speech you hear, either praise or disparagement, good or bad, you will not be afraid that it will harm you. So this is called the Lion-like Yoga.

Whatever you do, your mind will be happy and relaxed. Your nature will be pure and ultimately accomplished. Even if physically you are living in the impure land, your mind will enjoy the splendor of unimaginable bliss, like the bodhisattvas of the pure land. It is like the saying of the precious Kadam Lamas:

“Happiness should be brought under control, and suffering ended. If you are lonely, it will be the companion of sorrow. If you are sick, it will nurse you.”

For example, goldsmiths purify gold by melting it, and by rinsing it with water again and again they make it flexible. It is like that with the mind also: if by taking happiness as the Path you develop ardent desire (for the practice of Dharma, and if by taking suffering as the Path, you cleanse the mind; then you shall easily attain the extraordinary samadhi that makes one’s mind and body capable of accomplishing what one wishes.

I understand this alone to be important for the method of perfecting moral discipline, the root of the virtues. Because of non-attachment to happiness, the foundation of the excellent moral discipline of renunciation is created; and absence of fear of suffering will perfect moral discipline. As it is said:

“Giving is the basis of morality, and patience is the cleanser of morality.”

By training this way now, when you reach higher paths, then it shall come about as it is said:

“You shall realize that all phenomena are like an illusion. And that your births are like entering a garden. It will be the same in times of prosperity and decline: you will have no fear of defilements and suffering.”

Here is an illustration from the life of Buddha. Before attaining enlightenment, he renounced the Chakravartin’s rulership as if it were grass and dwelt by the Nairanjara River with no concern for the harshness of the austerities he was practicing. This indicates that you should develop the non-distinction of happiness and suffering in order to realize enlightenment.

After he attained enlightenment, the chiefs of men and gods, up to the highest realms, placed the Buddha’s feet on the crowns of their heads and offered him respect and service for all the needs of comfort. On the other hand, the Brahmin Bharadvaja abused him with a hundred scoldings. A Brahmin’s daughter slandered him with accusations of sexual misconduct. He ate rotten horse fodder for three months in the country of King Agnidatta, and so on. But he remained without any alterations of mind, high or low, just as Mount Sumero cannot be shaken by the wind. This indicates that you should make no distinctions between sufferings and happiness in order to act for the benefit of sentient beings.

COLOPHON:

It is appropriate for this doctrine to be taught by those who are like the Jowo Kadampas and who have a history of not crying when there is suffering and of having great repentance when there is happiness. If a man like me teaches it, I am afraid of the contempt of my own tongue. But with the aim of myself achieving the habit of equal taste in different circumstances, I, the old beggar Tenpe Nyima, have written this at the forest of many birds.

*Using Suffering to Train in Guru Devotion¹

Lama Zopa Rinpoche: When a problem happens, think “This is the blessing of the Guru purifying me by finishing my negative karmas and training my mind in Mahayana thought transformation, in order to achieve enlightenment for the sake of sentient beings. This is giving me the opportunity to develop my mind.”

¹ From “Transforming Problems (booklet)”, Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche