

HOW TO HANDLE DIFFICULTIES

A Teaching by Khenchen Konchog Gyaltshen

We all know there are two things in the world; physical and mental. Physically, we can see forms with our eyes; with our ears, we hear sounds; we smell odors with our nose; with our tongue, we taste; and we have a tactile sense, so we touch. Altogether, these are called the five physical attributes. The second thing in the world is mind, the mental aspect. Without the mind, we could not see, hear, smell, taste, or touch. This isn't a Buddhist belief; everyone has these attributes. When these two, the mental and physical, are very powerful, we can see beauty and ugliness, hear good and bad things. Modern technology also appears to be powerful and forceful. Then consider the mind. It is more powerful than all the outer physical objects because, in the end, mind makes the decisions.

Everyone wants peace, no matter which religion they may follow, or no religion, whether they are educated or uneducated, no matter which language they speak. This is a function of the mind. It is the mind that wants peace and happiness. The mind is the element that doesn't want to have mental or physical suffering. Everyone throughout the world, including animals and insects, desires peace and happiness. No one wants suffering.

Can you show me your mind? You cannot, but the mind is surely there. It has no color or size, but the mind is what desires peace and happiness and wants to avoid suffering, both physical and mental. So, we work hard to be free from suffering. In the end, the mind makes the decisions, whether we like it or want it.

The mind has two sides. One side is called wisdom or clear mind. It has the ability to see right and wrong causes. The other side of the mind is the afflicted or confused mind. This side is controlled by confusion and afflicting emotions such as ignorance, attachment, and aversion.

This can be illustrated with a story from the time of the Buddha.

There was a mother who loved her child so much that she felt the child was more important than her own life. Unfortunately, the child died when it was two months old. The mother said, "I cannot accept this. I can't endure this." She thought, "How can I bring my child back to life?" Spiritual healing was very powerful at the time of the Buddha, so the woman went to many teachers and requested that they bring back the life of her child. No one could do it. She couldn't sleep or eat because of her attachment to the child. The child had been her whole life. Finally, she heard that the Buddha was a powerful teacher. With high expectations, she went to him and requested that her child be brought back to life.

The Buddha saw her mental suffering and with great compassion, wisdom, and caring, he skillfully said, "Leave your dead child here. Go around to every house in this village and ask whether anyone in that household had ever died. Then at the house where no one has died, ask for a handful of rice." At the end of the day,

she hadn't found a single house where no one had died. She was frustrated, but at the same time, she felt light. She understood that someone had died at every house—some died young, some were old; some died at birth or from an accident or sickness. After hearing of these deaths, she thought, "Everyone has suffering and everyone dies. It's not only me." At the time of her child's death, she thought that she was the only unlucky one, and everyone else was happy.

With this new understanding, she returned to the Buddha and explained that she had not found a single house where no one had died. The Buddha said, "It's not only you who suffers, everyone suffers from attachment. I know you cared for and loved your child, but there is also strong attachment to the child. The love and attachment must be separated. You can care as much as you can, but release the attachment because attachment only brings suffering. As you saw, all the families love their family, and are attached to each other so much. Everyone expressed how they missed their loved ones who had died. Release your attachment and practice love for everyone, because everyone has the mental capability to love others. As you loved your child, from this moment love everyone in the country the same way because everyone desires peace and happiness. Wherever you see attachment, there is so much suffering. Instead, practice compassion to free all beings from suffering. Today, you learned a great lesson: how to release your attachment and love everyone. You see how much suffering there is and you can cultivate compassion for all sentient beings. Look at your mind. Relax your mind, and practice love and compassion."

Soon after the Buddha said this, the woman felt so good. The heaviness caused by the death of her child lifted and disappeared. "You rescued me! I almost died, and you helped me! What you say makes sense and I would like to continue this practice."

Look for this lesson in your own life. This mother had love in her mind, but her love was too connected to attachment. If love has attachment, it will bring suffering. So, the Buddha differentiated between love and attachment. Release the attachment, and practice love without attachment.

Everyone has love; even animals and insects love their offspring at birth. There is immediate love when birds hatch their eggs, for example. We need to know the meaning love and develop from this; extend the love to all others, not just to one or two individuals. With wisdom, we know how to practice love. Love is the universal way to bring peace and happiness. This isn't a religion, not a matter of whether we believe it or not. Anyone can practice this. In the family, in the city, country, in the world—love is universal.

At the same time we also have compassion, not compassion related to attachment but compassion for all who are suffering. Not only for your loved ones, or for one or two individuals, but for everyone who is suffering. Even your enemies who hate you desire to be free from

suffering. Having compassion becomes the cause of peace and happiness.

Now, pause for a moment. Take a deep breath. Inhale and exhale. Exhale all the stress and make your mind as wide as space.

Of the two forms, physical and mental, the physical being has limits whereas the mind is limitless. Recall the story of the mother. When she was confused, completely under the control of confusion, how much she suffered! As soon as she met the Buddha with all his great wisdom and compassion, her confusion was alleviated and it disappeared. She felt so much peace and happiness. Look at your own mind while it is confused and then again when the confusion has been dispelled. See how much peace is there under both circumstances.

When we practice, we need great skill and wisdom about the meaning of practice. Another story from the time of the Buddha is relevant here.

There was a vicious robber in the countryside. He was completely under the control of confusion, ruthless and without compassion. This man made his livelihood by robbing and killing many people. He was armed with a sharp knife and his own considerable strength.

The Buddha happened to pass by the robber. Unaware of the Buddha's identity, the robber stopped him and said, "I am going to rob you." The Buddha replied, "I have nothing, only my robe and begging bowl." The man replied, "Then I'll kill you." The Buddha said calmly, "OK, you can kill me. But first, I have two questions to ask you. Look at this tree. Can you cut off all the branches and leaves?" Since the man was very strong and had a sharp knife, he easily brought down the leaves and branches. The man said, "What is your next question?" The Buddha then asked him, "Can you put all the branches and leaves back again?" The man said, "What a silly question. No one could do this."

The Buddha continued, "Because you took the leaves and branches off so easily, I thought you could put them back just as easily, but it appears you have no ability to put them back. Those you have killed and robbed—I'm sure they screamed and begged you not to kill or rob them. How many suffered so much!" The man replied, "Yes, I remember that."

Now the Buddha said, "Suppose you were in their place. What if a man stronger than you came along and robbed you or threatened your life? What would you feel? You would feel such great, helpless suffering." The man acknowledged that he hadn't thought of this. The Buddha said, "You can kill me, but you aren't able to help me. Look at how much suffering you have given to so many people, but you haven't given any peace or happiness to anyone. Think about this carefully." So the man thought. Instead of killing the Buddha, he thought about all he had done, remembering the people he had killed and their screaming and begging not to kill them. His mind melted into natural compassion as he realized, "I've made a

big mistake with my life. I have robbed and killed so many, but never did anything good.” The man’s mind was totally transformed.

The Buddha said, “You should change your life style. What you are doing will not help you find peace and happiness. You will get old and, when you are old, no one will take care of you and you’ll suffer so much. But if you help others, others will help you, and you will benefit greatly.” The Buddha’s great skill, wisdom, and compassion helped this ruthless person. At that moment the man looked at his life and reflected on how many he had killed without compassion, and also how he not helped anyone in his whole life.

The Buddha explained carefully, with great skill, so that the man totally understood, and the ruthless man regretted all he had done. Then the man said to the Buddha, “I got your message. I acknowledge that I have made a great mistake; this isn’t the life I should stay with. I should change my life. I should be more helpful to others instead of destroying lives. Can I follow you so I can learn more from you?” The Buddha said, “Of course you can follow me.

“You thought you could get peace and happiness by destroying other’s lives. You wanted to free yourself from suffering by destroying others’ lives. You must now understand that everyone wants freedom, wants to have peace and happiness. Everyone wants to be free from suffering. When you create negative causes, you have to pay the price. The negative result will come. But if you do the right thing, the result of peace and happiness will also come.”

This isn’t a religious training, but our universal experience. Everywhere, everyone wants peace and happiness. We have to create the causes of peace and happiness if we want to be free from the cause of suffering. It is the mind, the confused mind, that keeps creating the cause of suffering even though we wish for peace and happiness. Therefore, by understanding the causes of suffering, we create the cause for peace and happiness and we will experience peace and happiness.

Look at the power of the mind. In just a few minutes the man who was totally ruthless, the embodiment of confusion and suffering, totally changed after meeting the Buddha and receiving the teachings. Look at the mind, before and after. It is your mind that makes the difference. The mind is very complex. The confused and deluded mind is what brings suffering and the causes of suffering. As soon as anger, aversion, strong attachment, and greed arise, that itself is suffering and creates the causes that bring the result of suffering. When we practice Dharma, we can reduce all these mental afflictions. We must practice this.

On the other hand, when we practice loving kindness we can know the nature of the mind. We all have the capacity for loving kindness, but we must acknowledge it and expand it. Love and compassion themselves are real peace. When there is peace, there is happiness. This isn’t a spiritual thing; it is reality. Everyone requires it. When we want peace and happiness, we have to

practice loving kindness. It isn't a sign of weakness or fear. It is sign of strength and courage. These are the precious things. The demarcation is confusion and loving kindness. The confused and deluded mind is what brings suffering and the causes of suffering. The cause of peace and happiness is loving kindness. Keep these things in mind.

The two stories I mentioned are examples of our relationship to suffering, how confusion in oneself creates suffering for oneself and others. Then after receiving the precious teachings on wisdom and compassion, confusion and mental afflictions disappear. These teachings make a big difference for individuals and society at large.

Look at the mind. The mind is complex, sophisticated, and vast. If you asked to see it, there would be nothing to show. Even great scientists have difficulty defining and understanding the mind. The mind isn't a religious thing or a belief. Everyone has this mind. What the Buddha taught 2,600 years ago is still fresh in this 21st century. The causes of suffering and the causes of peace and happiness have not changed.

Take a moment to recite the 100-syllable mantra. When you say "AH" at the end, slowly let your breathe go down. Then dissolve into the space of emptiness. Whatever you hear disappears within the emptiness.

Now, everywhere, this is what it is about. The whole world is influenced by causality. All the world leaders are talking about climate change causing disasters: fire, flooding, and so forth. These things are happening because the mind is in the wrong place. We must maintain a mind that avoids the causes of suffering and creates the great cause for peace and happiness. Because everything functions under and within causality, we must look at this and practice the Dharma.

Emptiness is the reality of the nature of all phenomena, including the afflicting emotions. Recall the two stories I related earlier. Before they met the Buddha, their minds were full of confusion, delusion, and dualistic thinking. How much suffering they had! When we look at the nature of their suffering, it is clear that it was directly caused by their confusion. After receiving the wisdom of skillful teachings, they understood and accepted what the Buddha said. Because of their new understanding, all their confusion dissolved into emptiness. As soon as this happened, they found it was not merely empty; it was a state of great peace.

Mentally and physically, they enjoyed peace and happiness. This is what I mean about the emptiness of delusion. When all the delusions dissolve and disappear, that is emptiness. We are not negating things that truly exist nor are we making them empty. Rather, we are realizing that delusion itself has nowhere to abide. When viewed with proper wisdom and critical insight, the delusions just disappear, leaving peace and happiness.

Perhaps you have heard of "emptiness and clarity." Emptiness refers to the absence of delusion. Clarity refers to the mind's great qualities of love and compassion, in particular to non-referential loving kindness and non-referential compassion. These are qualities of the mind itself or buddha nature. You already have them, but you must develop critical wisdom to recognize them and experience them. The qualities of the Buddha are not something we create. They are

veiled by a thick habit of mental delusions and it will take a lot of effort to purify these impermanent propensities. Ridding ourselves of these delusions takes practice. The purifying practice is called meditation. We really need meditation to eliminate our inveterate negative habits.

Emptiness does not mean there is no level of I, but it is without self-grasping thoughts such as “I need that” or “I want this.” During the pandemic lock down, people suffered so much because of self grasping. Self fixation makes your world intolerably narrow. So, it becomes imperative that we purify the delusion of self grasping.

Everywhere we go there are human beings. We humans are social animals. We need to see that all our benefits come from other human beings. Our food and clothes depend on others. Therefore, we need to practice loving kindness toward all others.

Whether or not we practice impermanence, we can see that everything changes. The reality of nature is that everything that is compounded is subject to change. Looking at this truth helps to purify our fixations. The fixated mind is reduced by understanding impermanence. Even though our mind continues to be fixated–grasping at what we think is real, concrete, and never changing—we can reduce our fixations. We can let go and purify by reflecting on impermanence. There is no need to think of impermanence as something negative. It is actually precious information that helps us reduce fixation and take us closer to liberation. So, reflect on impermanence, on how everything is constantly changing.

Right from this point all the way to emptiness, all Dharma practices are designed to purify our mental confusion. Practices such as visualizing and chanting mantras, for example, are the means that the Buddha taught to free our mind from confusion and mental affliction. We know we suffer from mental afflictions. People attempt suicide because of mental afflictions—not because they lack food and clothes, but because of mental suffering. Mental suffering is very complicated and profound. Only Dharma can help us with mental affliction, mental confusion, and all the suffering we endure. Dharma is wisdom. It is the way to dismantle and purify all our confusion. That is the whole purpose of Dharma. Dharma is indispensable because purifying delusion would be impossible without it.

We need Dharma in this modern time, everywhere. At the same time, instead of all this fancy technology and medical power, we need a good teacher who can explain the Dharma to us. We need a clear, practical and direct approach on how to handle the purification of delusion. We need Dharma to understand how delusions are created and how purification reduces delusions. From my heart, I ask you to study and practice these things.

Dharma is the way to be free from suffering. Therefore, I emphasize practice. The reason to practice is to be able to look at the mind. We want to practice Dharma; we want our mind to be calm and peaceful, but the afflictions are so powerful that they take up our attention. People might say, “I cannot practice Dharma. I cannot meditate. Dharma is good, but it isn’t for me.” Is there an alternative? In reality, there is no alternative.

Look at those who are drunk, who are so habituated to alcohol that they can't give up drinking. They know it isn't good, but the habit is deeply rooted. They need courage and skill to understand that their habit is impermanent. We also need to have a strong conviction so that our delusional habits can be changed. It isn't easy, but habits can be changed with effort and dedication. Say to yourself, "I need to purify, that is why I need a daily effort." You can definitely change if you apply enough effort with conviction, day after day, day after day.

If you make excuses like "This isn't for me," "I can't do this. My life isn't designed for this," then there is no hope, no way to change. We know the mind can change, and that makes Dharma practice very important. You can make a difference with study and practice.

In summary, when you were isolated during the pandemic, there was so much suffering. You wanted to go outside and socialize because you were strongly habituated that way. But then there were other individuals who dedicated themselves by staying inside and focusing on their own mind and meditation. Thus, socializing was just a distraction caused by habit. Therefore, meditate and reflect on Dharma practice.

This isn't a religious training in Buddhism; it is universal knowledge. It is the necessary way to bring peace and happiness, to be free from suffering. We need Dharma everywhere to develop, to become good human beings, for oneself and all others. The Buddhadharmas is wisdom and we need this wisdom in the world so much. Please keep this in mind as you go forward.

QUESTION: How can we confront or manage fear?

ANSWER: There are many types of fear. Managing fear depends on the conditions and the situation, about why you have fear. Generally, if you practice loving kindness and compassion toward all others, others will see the suffering in themselves. Especially regarding the ones you are afraid of, if you practice, you'll come to see that they have delusions and that they want to be free of them. Out of compassion for others, your fear will lessen.

Ask yourself, "What am I afraid of? I'm afraid that someone is attacking me so I am grasping at myself." Release self grasping as much as possible. The self is just a notion, an illusion, so I am able to release the self grasping. That will greatly reduce your fear.

If you are a Dharma practitioner, see everything as a manifestation of many causes and conditions. Everything is temporary. Reflecting and meditating will also help with fear.

QUESTION: How do I help people who are suffering from terminal illness or painful sickness, without hope of a cure and with lots of suffering and pain?

ANSWER: Suffering is shared by everyone. Sooner or later, those who are in this human condition will share hopelessness. Someday we will all go down this path. As a Dharma practitioner, develop love and compassion for all others. You can pray and meditate like this:

May all be free from this suffering and may everyone have peace and happiness.

May the suffering that I have be purified and may I be free from suffering and the

cause of suffering. Meditate on everyone having peace and happiness.
Accept the situation and then do everything you are able to do.

QUESTION: How can we help those who are not practitioners?

ANSWER: You, as a Dharma practitioner, should be a good example by keeping your mind clear. Peace and happiness manifest in the clear mind, in the mind of the compassion. There is wisdom in doing the right thing, in helping others or at least in not harming others. This is very important as a Dharma practitioner. You don't have to use Buddhism, but you can use terms such as loving kindness, compassion, causality, courage, and wisdom. You can show others how to become a better human being. You can also say, "You are not the only one suffering, there are many suffering in the world. The cause of suffering is a reaction to negative emotions, to mental afflictions." Through these words, you can help. Then slowly, later, you can do better, you can do more. This is a way you can help.

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