

Dealing with Stress, Anxiety and Suffering

A reconstructed teaching by Geshe Tenzin Zopa

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Editorial note

This is a cleaned and coherent reconstruction from the supplied automatic transcript. Verbal fillers, false starts, repeated words, incidental room sounds and the neighbouring group's singing have been removed. The order, examples and substance of the teaching have been preserved, with light grammatical editing for readability. Standard Buddhist terms have been restored where the context is clear. Passages too obscured to recover reliably have been omitted rather than guessed.

Settling the mind and establishing motivation

Good afternoon. It is good to meet you again.

We will begin with a few rounds of breathing. Place the mind simply on the breath as it comes in and goes out. This helps us settle the body and mind in the present moment. It is good to keep the back comfortably straight so that the channels and energies can function well.

To make our time meaningful and beneficial, we establish a constructive motivation. In this way, our time together becomes a cause for purifying limitations, accumulating virtue and beneficial energy, and developing wisdom. It also helps us concentrate the body and mind upon the wisdom and beneficial thoughts taught by the enlightened Buddha.

There are many motivations we can establish. From the Mahāyāna Buddhist point of view, the most beneficial is bodhicitta, the altruistic mind of enlightenment. From the depth of your heart, aspire: "I wish to lead limitless living beings to the state of peerless happiness: to Buddhahood, the state in which all good qualities are perfected and all limitations, karma, delusions and suffering are overcome. For this purpose, may I achieve liberation and enlightenment, with all the wisdom, knowledge and good qualities of the buddhas and bodhisattvas."

Mean this sincerely and dedicate your time here to that purpose.

Stress, anxiety and the three kinds of suffering

Our topic is how to deal with stress and anxiety. First we need to understand what these words mean. Different people may have different ideas about stress and anxiety. From the Buddhist point of view, any experience influenced by a deluded mind (by anger, attachment, ego, jealousy, self-centredness, mistaken views or negative attitudes) falls within the category of suffering, whether or not we presently recognise it as stressful or anxious.

Anything contaminated by karma and delusion belongs to saṃsāra. Buddhist teachings describe **three kinds of suffering: the suffering of pain, the suffering of change and pervasive compounded suffering**.

The suffering of pain is easy to recognise. It includes experiences that are plainly painful, inconvenient or distressing.

The suffering of change is harder to detect because an ordinary mind mistakes it for pleasure. Sensory pleasures, emotional excitement and the fulfilment of desire appear enjoyable and desirable. Yet they contain no lasting or independent happiness. They end through exhaustion or change into the suffering of pain.

From the Dharma point of view, worldly success and achievement have the character of the suffering of change. However high we climb, there will eventually be a fall. Status, material power, beauty, health and

long life do not last. We continually pursue good health, but even the best health eventually declines. Medical science may extend and support life, but life still has a limit and ends in death.

Change itself can therefore be stressful. A medical check-up can bring anxiety because we do not know what we will hear. Even when the news is good, maintaining health can become another source of stress. Whatever worldly condition we pursue, there is effort and anxiety because it cannot be secured permanently.

The third kind is pervasive compounded suffering: the condition of simply having a body and mind produced by karma and delusion. There is stress in relation to the environment, the body and the mind, whether or not we recognise it. At this moment I may not feel physical pain, yet the body remains subject to ageing, illness and death. Ordinarily we recognise only the suffering of pain and may hardly identify the other two as suffering.

Anything within saṃsāra is therefore limited. To deal with stress, anxiety and suffering, we first need the wisdom of renunciation: a clear recognition of these limitations. If we do not recognise pain as a problem, we will not seek a cure. In the same way, if we do not see the limitations of the suffering of change and pervasive conditioned suffering, we will not seek the path that leads beyond them.

This is why the Buddha taught in the first noble truth that suffering is to be understood.

Suffering arises from causes

Suffering did not fall from the sky and was not created by somebody else. It is a product of causes and conditions; it arises dependently.

Where do those causes and conditions come from? They arise from our own actions of body, speech and mind. Karmic potentials are the direct causes and conditions of our experiences. Karma, in turn, is produced under the influence of delusions such as ignorance, anger, attachment, ego and self-centredness.

The delusions were not placed in us by someone else either. They develop within our own mind because the mind is confused. It does not clearly understand what is to be adopted and what is to be abandoned, or what is true and what is false. From this confusion, ignorance develops. From ignorance come the other delusions; from the delusions come karmic actions and potentials; and from karma come the many forms of saṃsāric life with all their ups and downs, stress and anxiety.

After teaching that suffering is to be understood, the Buddha taught the second noble truth: the causes of suffering are to be abandoned. To be free of suffering, we must remove its causes (karma and delusion, including ignorance) by applying their antidotes.

The entire path can be included within method and wisdom. The method side includes love, compassion, empathy, bodhicitta, generosity, patience, ethical discipline, concentration and service concerned with the wellbeing of others. The wisdom side understands reality, especially selflessness, emptiness and dependent arising.

Transforming anger through compassion and patience

The method side of the path replaces harmful attitudes with beneficial ones. Instead of filling the mind with hatred, fill it with love and compassion. Instead of self-centredness, cultivate concern for the wellbeing and progress of others.

How do we bring about this transformation? When a negative emotion such as anger arises, it is unrealistic for a beginner simply to remove it from the mind immediately. Buddhist teaching does not demand the impossible. Instead, it teaches us to take the emotion onto the path.

Use logical reasoning to examine the harm caused by anger: not only its harm to others, but its harm to yourself. Then reflect on the advantages of love and compassion. Treat each negative experience as an opportunity to train and develop a good heart. When anger arises, instead of becoming completely

occupied and guided by it, remind yourself: “This is an opportunity to develop my heart.” Remember the Buddha’s teaching, reasoning and simple common sense.

When you become angry at someone, you may intend to harm that person, but the person certain to be hurt by your anger is yourself. Anger is like holding a burning coal with the intention of throwing it at an enemy. Whether or not the coal reaches the other person, your own hand is already burning. However disturbing the situation, there is no benefit in remaining angry.

The person who disturbs you and causes you to lose patience can be regarded as a teacher in disguise, training you in patience. Pleasant people do not test our patience. To develop it, we need difficult people and difficult situations. Without the practice of patience, no one can become a buddha, a bodhisattva or even a deeply good person.

Recovered wording from the audio during singing interference.

The audio provides Geshe-la’s own wording more clearly at this point:

“The person who disturbs you and causes you to lose patience is actually like a teacher (a guru disguised in the form of that disturbing person) to train your patience. To train our heart in patience, we need difficult times and difficult people.”

He then explains why those who cause harm should become objects of compassion:

“Someone who causes pain is suffering. Genuinely happy people do not hurt others. Kind and compassionate people do not hurt others; suffering people hurt others. Therefore, in the eyes of compassion, that person becomes an object of your care, forgiveness, understanding and benefit. Good people may not need our good wishes and prayers as urgently; people who harm others need our prayers, good wishes and care because they are lacking care. That is why they harm others.”

Someone who is disturbing you may therefore be teaching you kindness, compassion, patience and acceptance. We should also understand that a person who causes pain is suffering. A genuinely happy person does not hurt others. Kind, compassionate people do not harm others; suffering people do. When we receive harm, the person harming us is showing the symptoms of inner pain.

If you wish to develop the heart of a bodhisattva, such a person becomes an object of your compassion, forgiveness, understanding and help. People who are already happy and fulfilled may not need our prayers and good wishes as urgently. Those who harm others lack inner wellbeing, and this is precisely why they need compassion.

This is how training the mind gradually replaces anger with patience and compassion. The moment you begin to see a situation through the beneficial methods of the path, transformation has already begun. Bodhisattvas were once no different from us, but they trained in this way in daily life until negative emotions were completely replaced by immeasurable love, compassion and bodhicitta.

Eventually they become entirely harmless. Even if someone tries to injure or kill them, they are not inwardly disturbed and do not retaliate. They feel compassion for the aggressor and may even cherish that person because the difficulty enables them to advance more quickly on the path.

We can begin practising this in ordinary life. Compassion can turn our whole experience around. We may not be able to stop every harmful action performed by others, but we can develop protection against receiving it as an inner wound. Whether we use that protection is in our hands.

The traditional example is walking across ground covered with thorns. There is not enough leather to cover the whole earth, but a small piece of leather beneath each foot serves the same purpose. In the same way, we cannot control and change the entire world, but we can train our own mind.

Even a buddha cannot simply remove another being’s karma and suffering, nor place enlightenment, compassion and wisdom into someone’s mind. Beings must train according to their own dispositions. Yet every being has buddha-potential and can become happy, peaceful and awakened. What is needed is correct guidance, method and instruction, followed by our own sincere practice.

The Buddha's principal way of benefiting beings is to reveal the Dharma: the wisdom and methods he himself practised when he was an ordinary person. He is the proof that they work. He too was once controlled by karma, delusion and self-centredness and experienced many forms of rebirth and suffering. By practising the path, he became free of karma, delusion and destructive emotion and achieved the deathless awakened state, whose qualities and happiness never decline.

If we train as he trained, we can achieve the result he achieved. This means taking every experience onto the path. Live with bodhicitta and compassion. Experience both happiness and suffering with compassion. Communicate with others and with yourself compassionately. When everything is held by compassion, difficulties no longer disturb the mind in the same way. Where there is no disturbance, fear, anxiety and stress lose their power.

An ordinary example of fearlessness

My brother is a layman and is illiterate. He spent much of his life caring for animals and working in the fields before moving to town. A few years ago, someone making a documentary about my life interviewed him. He is usually quiet, so it was the first time I heard him speak at length about his outlook.

He is a strong and confident person whom the whole village respects. People invite him to witness marriages and important events even though, unlike the usual principal guest, he neither sings nor gives speeches.

The interviewer asked him, "Do you have fear?"

He replied, "No."

"You do not fear death?"

"No. I am simply living. When death comes, it comes. I do not waste time worrying about when it will come, how it will come or what it will feel like."

The interviewer asked whether he feared other people. He answered, "I do not harm anybody, so why should I fear that someone will harm me?"

"But even if you do not harm others, someone might still attack you."

He said, "That is their problem. I have no worry. Their action is their concern, not mine. I live in peace. I do not need to keep watching who is behind me or in front of me. I simply walk as myself."

Although he may not know the formal definitions, he is very compassionate and humble. If someone without family or friends dies and nobody wants to touch the body, he will go, care for it, make the arrangements and send it for cremation. He acts without broadcasting what he does or seeking acknowledgement. He deals with others through humanity, compassion and respect and does not divide people according to family, age or status. If someone is in trouble, he goes to help.

The protection he has from fear comes, I think, from living compassionately. Compassion is universal and does not depend upon being religious. If we bring everything under compassion (seeing, acting and experiencing through compassion) many problems are solved. Most importantly, we become freer from fear, suspicion and the exhausting restlessness of an anxious mind.

Every being has a compassionate nature and buddha-potential. Violence and other negative emotions are not the fundamental nature of a person. They are temporary parts of experience that the confused mind magnifies and identifies as "me": "I am an unhappy person; I am an angry person." In fact, that emotion is only one small, passing part of the mind.

Buddhist training does not ordinarily begin by plucking emotions out and throwing them away. The first step is to learn how to relate to them kindly, gently, peacefully, wisely and compassionately. This is the beginning of transformation and, eventually, freedom from saṃsāra.

Replacing the inner government

Many difficulties in life arise from wrong views, wrong judgement and a mistaken understanding of life. The root of these is self-grasping ignorance: a false idea of the self. We identify as ourselves something that is not the true mode of the person, then allow body, speech and mind to act under the leadership of that false person.

Self-cherishing, attachment and other negative emotions arise from this self-grasping ignorance. It is like appointing a president or prime minister who has no knowledge of how to benefit the people. The leader promises wonderful things but brings the whole country to ruin.

Until we understand the legitimate person (the self that exists dependently) and let our actions be guided by that understanding, we continually create confusion and the causes of further suffering.

We could compare self-grasping ignorance to a corrupt president, self-cherishing to the home minister, attachment to another powerful minister, and so forth. Buddhist teachings speak of three root poisons, six root afflictions, twenty secondary afflictions and, more broadly, 84,000 delusions. It is as if 84,000 toxic officials were running our life while claiming, “I work for your happiness. I am here to protect and serve you.” They use our name, but we receive no benefit: only harm.

When we learn and practise Dharma, we bring about a peaceful inner revolution and replace this parliament. Self-grasping ignorance is replaced by the wisdom realising ultimate truth, selflessness and dependent arising. Self-cherishing is replaced by great compassion and cherishing others. Jealousy is replaced by rejoicing.

The new government introduces a different policy: in every relationship (in the workplace, in the family and with yourself) communicate through compassion and respect. This brings both temporary wellbeing and ultimate happiness.

The old government told us to fulfil attachment, retaliate against anyone who harmed us, defeat others and always be the winner. On the level of nations, it says to destroy another country in order to make our own safe. These are the policies of attachment, anger, ego, jealousy and competition. They claim to work for us, yet the result is less peace, less safety, more stress and more uncertainty.

This is evident in individual life too. The more selfishly we behave, the more insecure we become. The more we conduct our relationships through anger, the more friends we lose and the more enemies we create.

Jealousy causes us to suffer at another person’s success. Why should their success become our suffering? If a neighbour prospers, we can share in that happiness simply by rejoicing. The outer event is the same; the attitude determines whether it becomes pain or joy.

Likewise, when someone harms us, patience and compassion reduce stress immediately. The heart becomes calmer and more peaceful. Karmically, the practice accumulates merit and helps purify the negative relationship. By developing inner protection, we become more secure even amid difficult circumstances.

Applying the wisdom of emptiness

Training in the method side of the path can already free us from much suffering and stress. Applying the wisdom side may be more difficult, but even a basic understanding can have a powerful and rapid effect.

Examine the nature of the person who appears to receive the harm: the person experiencing anxiety, stress and fear. When you really search for that person, you cannot find the solid, independent “me” that ordinarily appears.

Who is experiencing fear? Who is holding the painful past and allowing it to torture the present? Where is the “me” filled with anxiety about the uncertainty of tomorrow?

Anxiety projected into the future and suffering based on memories of the past are mental projections. They appear solid, but if we search for them, we cannot find even one atom that exists in the way it appears: “This is the thing I fear; this is the hurt I am holding.”

As long as self-grasping ignorance operates, we function according to the narrative of a falsely established person. Anger, attachment and jealousy speak the language of this false “I”. Wisdom, love and compassion speak the language of the person who legitimately exists in dependence upon causes, parts and designation.

To investigate, search for the self. You do not have to travel around the world; there are only two broad possibilities: it is either within the aggregates of body and mind or outside them.

Within the aggregates are form, feeling, discrimination, compositional factors and consciousness. Our ordinary sense of self is strongly associated with the physical body. We look in a mirror and say, “I am looking at myself.” Yet when we search from the crown of the head to the soles of the feet, no part can be identified as the self. The heart is not the self, the eyes are not the self, and no single cell is the self. Feeling is not the self and consciousness is not the self. We naturally say “my body” and “my mind,” distinguishing the possessor from what is possessed.

The person is also not identical with the collection of aggregates. If the person were identical with the physical collection, losing a body part through surgery would mean losing part of the person in the same sense, which does not follow. Nor can the self be found as something independently separate from the aggregates, among outer objects or among the elements of earth, water, fire, air and space.

When no inherently existing self can be found, ask: who is being hurt by another person’s action? Who is frightened? This examination loosens the solidity of fear and anxiety.

This does not mean that you do not exist. If persons did not exist at all, karma, liberation and enlightenment would be meaningless. The ordinary person exists, and buddhahood is achievable. Compassionate nature and buddha-potential are real. But the person exists merely in dependence upon a valid basis and a designation by mind, not independently from its own side.

My own name illustrates this. When my mother gave birth to me, my parents still had to decide upon a name. Had I been born in London, perhaps I would not have received the name Tenzin Zopa; perhaps I would have been called Peter: or even Mr Bean! Culture, place, language, familiarity, my parents and other causes and conditions all played a role.

If they had called me only Zopa, I would not be called Tenzin. The person called Tenzin Zopa exists in dependence upon a label designated by mind on a valid basis. I could introduce myself to you as Peter and you might then call me Peter, but for that to become my valid name there must be an appropriate basis and convention. A label cannot function arbitrarily without a valid basis.

From a subtler Buddhist perspective, karma is also among the causes and conditions for receiving a particular life, culture and name. A name is merely designated, but it does not appear accidentally or without causes.

So who experiences anxiety? The merely labelled Tenzin Zopa experiences merely labelled anxiety: not a truly and independently existing Tenzin Zopa experiencing truly and independently existing anxiety. Bringing this understanding into the heart through analysis can greatly reduce the reaction and the power of the emotion.

This is Buddhist mind training: transforming problems into the path. Whenever an emotion or difficult situation arises, understand it through wisdom or transform it through beneficial attitude. These methods truly work.

Impermanence as immediate medicine

We hold many fixations about people, places and situations: “This will be here forever,” or “I will go through this forever.” Yet it has already changed or gone.

Our habitual way of experiencing emotion carries false views of solidity and permanence even when we do not state them aloud. When a problem appears, the first impression is often that it is solid, overwhelming and permanent: “This will be with me forever. This is it.” The thought seldom arises, “It is impermanent. It will last only a little while, so I should take it easy.”

This happens because our system functions under ignorance. If it functioned under the wisdom of selflessness and emptiness, the problem would lose its apparent solidity. Even if we cannot yet see its ultimate empty nature, we can recognise its relative impermanence.

We can say, “This is shocking and painful, but it will pass. It will not stay with me forever. I can take it easy.” The moment we use this Dharma tool, anxiety, fear and confusion begin to settle. When the mind is calmer and clearer, we find a solution more accurately and quickly.

A large part of the suffering surrounding an obstacle is exaggerated by ignorance, especially the belief that it will last forever. This is false even conventionally. Either the problem will give up on us or we will give up on the problem; it is only a matter of time.

The wisdom of impermanence is like immediate medicine. It may not cure the deepest cause completely, but it protects us from fear, panic and emotional crisis. It helps us let go of holding the problem as permanent, solid and enormous.

The same applies when something pleasant occurs. Enjoy it, but do not grasp at it beyond its nature. Relationships, family, business, environment, politics, emotional health and physical health are all impermanent. Seeing their relative nature can immediately reduce much of our suffering. With less stress, the mind becomes clearer and can choose the right antidote.

This insight can then deepen. We can transform the experience through compassion on the method side of the path, or investigate emptiness on the wisdom side. Grasping at permanence is a readily visible layer of the deeper grasping at inherent existence. When the grip of permanence loosens, the deeper grasping also begins to lose its ground. We relax and can manage the situation more easily.

Buddhist mind training, which can also be called Buddhist psychology, uses these two principal tools: method and wisdom. Method includes loving-kindness, compassion and bodhicitta. Wisdom includes impermanence, selflessness, dependent arising and emptiness. Whichever authentic teaching we open, these are the essential antidotes used to transform problems.

True happiness and rejoicing

These teachings provide a starting point for enjoying a life full of meaning, possibility, love, compassion and beneficial activity. The more wisdom and compassion we cultivate, the more inner resources we have and the more fulfilled the heart becomes. Fulfilment in virtue is inner peace and true happiness.

In Buddhist teaching, true happiness does not mean mere excitement, emotional elation or sensory pleasure. It arises through wisdom and virtue. Without that connection to virtue, an experience remains sensory or worldly happiness and cannot provide true peace.

Suppose you win a large lottery. You may feel excited and happy, but if the material abundance is not transformed into virtue, it can bring more stress and many further problems. To produce genuine peace, our actions, achievements, motivations and dedications need to be based in virtue or at least in universal human values.

When the heart is in harmony with truth and virtue, a quiet joy arises. That joy is true happiness, and it can last in a way that sensory excitement cannot. We can renew it at any time through rejoicing.

If you want to experience joy continually, **rejoice** continually. Be mindful of what is good, recognise it and appreciate it. Such inner peace is not easily interrupted by outer conditions. Illness and even death need not destroy it, because its source is within.

It is like possessing a precious jewel kept in a safe. You may own it, but to benefit from it you must use it. In the same way, we utilise the source of inner peace by recognising virtue and rejoicing in it.

Suppose you sincerely offer a bowl of rice to a hungry person on the street. Buddhist teaching says that you should not boast about it, but you should rejoice. Think, “I did something good; I was able to benefit someone.” Each time you sincerely appreciate that virtue, your happiness increases and the power of the merit increases.

Karma has the special quality that once created it does not simply vanish without producing a result unless it is opposed or purified. A compassionate and generous action produces a result similar to its cause: further virtue and happiness. Therefore, rejoice in every good action: your own and others’. In this way, even amid suffering, you continue to cultivate the causes of true and lasting peace.