

Dealing with Stress, Anxiety and Suffering

Main underlying themes of Geshe Tenzin Zopa's teaching

Summary of the teaching given on 22 August 2026

Geshe Tenzin Zopa's central message is that suffering is not determined solely by what happens to us. Much of it depends on how the mind interprets and responds to experience. Through compassion and wisdom, difficult circumstances can become part of the spiritual path rather than merely sources of distress.

1. Recognising the full nature of suffering

Buddhism identifies three forms of suffering:

- Obvious physical and emotional pain.
- The suffering of change: pleasant experiences cannot last and become painful when they end.
- Pervasive conditioned suffering: the underlying vulnerability of a body and mind governed by karma and delusion.

Recognising these limitations is not pessimism. It creates renunciation: the sincere wish to find genuine freedom rather than repeatedly seeking security in conditions that cannot provide it.

2. Suffering has causes and can therefore be overcome

Suffering does not arise randomly or through the will of an outside creator. It develops through a sequence of causes and conditions:

Confusion and ignorance → delusions → karmic actions → suffering.

Because suffering is dependently arisen rather than fixed, changing its causes changes its results. The path therefore works at the level of the mind, actions and habitual responses.

3. The path combines method and wisdom

The Buddhist path has two complementary dimensions:

- **Method:** love, compassion, patience, generosity, ethical conduct, bodhicitta and concern for others.
- **Wisdom:** understanding impermanence, selflessness, dependent arising and emptiness.

Method transforms the emotional response to suffering. Wisdom challenges the mistaken perceptions that make suffering appear solid, permanent and overwhelming.

4. Difficult people can become spiritual teachers

A person who provokes anger gives us an opportunity to practise patience. Anger harms us immediately, regardless of whether it harms its intended target: like holding a burning coal in preparation to throw it at someone.

People who harm others are themselves suffering. Genuinely peaceful and happy people do not deliberately cause pain. Seeing the suffering behind harmful conduct allows anger to be gradually replaced by understanding and compassion.

This does not necessarily mean approving of harmful behaviour. It means refusing to let another person's actions control and injure our own mind.

5. Inner transformation provides real protection

We cannot cover the whole earth with leather, but we can protect our feet with shoes. Similarly, we cannot control everyone or eliminate every difficult circumstance, but we can train the mind that meets them.

Compassion becomes a form of inner protection. It reduces fear, suspicion and anxiety because our peace no longer depends entirely upon other people behaving as we wish.

Geshe-la's brother illustrates this principle. Although he had not formally studied Buddhist philosophy, his harmlessness, humility and practical compassion gave him a remarkable freedom from fear.

6. Our compassionate nature is deeper than our afflictions

Anger, fear and violence are temporary mental conditions, not the fundamental identity of a person. We suffer further when we magnify a passing emotion and declare, "This is me" or "I am an angry, unhappy person."

Every being possesses compassionate nature and buddha-potential. Buddhist practice does not begin by violently rejecting unwanted emotions. It teaches us to meet and transform them gently, intelligently and compassionately.

7. The mind needs a peaceful inner revolution

Geshe-la compares the delusions to a corrupt government:

- Self-grasping ignorance is the misguided leader.
- Self-cherishing, attachment, anger and jealousy are its ministers.
- They claim to protect us but produce insecurity, conflict and suffering.

Dharma brings a peaceful change of government:

- Ignorance is replaced by wisdom.
- Self-centredness is replaced by compassion.
- Anger is replaced by patience.
- Jealousy is replaced by rejoicing.

The more selfishly and defensively we live, the more insecure we become. The more we rejoice in others' happiness, practise compassion and cultivate respect, the more peaceful our inner world becomes.

8. The solid, suffering "I" cannot be found

Fear and anxiety seem to happen to a solid, independent self. Yet when we search for this self within the body and mind, it cannot be found.

The person does exist, but only dependently: upon the body and mind, causes and conditions, relationships, concepts and designation. Geshe-la illustrates this using his own name: "Tenzin Zopa" is real and functional, but it exists through convention and dependent designation, not as something independently established from its own side.

The same is true of anxiety. A dependently existing person experiences dependently existing anxiety. Neither exists with the absolute solidity it appears to possess. Understanding this weakens the emotional reaction without denying conventional reality.

9. Impermanence is immediate medicine

When a problem arises, the mind tends to think:

"This is enormous. This is permanent. This will be with me forever."

That impression adds a great deal of suffering to the original difficulty. Remembering impermanence allows us to respond:

"This is painful, but it will change. It cannot remain forever."

Impermanence may not remove the underlying causes of suffering immediately, but it reduces panic and creates enough mental space to respond wisely. The same understanding helps us enjoy pleasant experiences without grasping at them.

10. True happiness arises from virtue

Sensory pleasure, excitement and material success cannot provide lasting peace. Even winning a lottery may create further anxiety if the wealth is not used meaningfully.

True happiness arises when the heart is aligned with wisdom, compassion and virtue. It is the quiet fulfilment that comes from benefiting others and living according to universal values.

Rejoicing renews this happiness. We should not boast about our good actions, but we should recognise and appreciate them. Rejoicing in our own and others' virtue increases joy and strengthens positive karmic potential.

11. Guidance opens the way, but transformation is our responsibility

Even a buddha cannot simply remove another being's karma and suffering or place compassion, wisdom and enlightenment into someone's mind. Because experiences arise through each person's causes, conditions and karmic dispositions, every individual must apply the path personally.

The Buddha benefits beings by revealing the Dharma: the wisdom, attitudes and methods that he himself used to progress from an ordinary, deluded being to complete awakening. His achievement demonstrates that transformation is possible. Every being possesses buddha-potential, but correct guidance must be received, understood and put into practice.

This places responsibility for change within our own hands. Spiritual instruction can show us the direction, but freedom develops through repeatedly training our own mind.

12. Every experience can be taken onto the path

Mind training does not require us to wait for ideal circumstances. Happiness, suffering, difficult people, illness, emotional pain and uncertainty can all become material for spiritual development.

To take an experience onto the path means meeting it with bodhicitta, compassion or wisdom. We experience suffering with compassion, enjoy happiness without grasping, communicate with others compassionately and relate to ourselves with the same care. In this way, difficult circumstances become opportunities to develop the qualities that lead towards liberation and enlightenment.

The purpose is not to pretend that painful experiences do not hurt. It is to prevent them from being spiritually wasted. When an experience strengthens compassion, patience or wisdom, it has been transformed into part of the path.

The teaching in one sentence

The most reliable way to deal with suffering is to understand its causes, recognise its impermanent and empty nature, and transform our response through compassion, patience, wisdom and rejoicing.