

## Bringing Suffering and Happiness to the Path.

*Dharma roadside dialogue series*

*June 26, 2021 #9 Dialogue*

*Lama Tsony*

*Q: It seems that when I have brief glimpses of being in the moment, that the looping thoughts have no place in that, no space? So if I am really in the moment with something I am doing, eating, the dishes, if I am present then I am not in the discursive thought, I am free of it. And when trapped in thoughts I am not in the present moment. I can sort of see the crack in the thoughts part, but not the emotions. I feel concerned when I am suffering. I don't know how to get out of it; I understand it, but being honest, being really sick, for instance, would really scare me. How to get out of it?*

A: First, congratulations for cracking the first nut. It's a beginning, that's how we start, one step at a time, so that's really good, because you understand that you can be having a lot of thoughts and concerns and also being one step away and seeing them without drama. I think that's a very important experience that we make when we regularly practice calm-abiding, just that, and the use of any support is helpful. Obviously we pay attention to our breath, but as you mentioned, when you are doing something and you are fully doing it, you can have in the background all sorts of thoughts but you're not dragged by them. Because you are really attentively doing what you do, like if you're doing the dishes, or preparing lunch, or if you're walking, it is actually like using your breath as a support. It's an anchor, you know, you're not drifting; whatever support you use brings you back to the awareness and helps you to experience this distance from the preoccupations, your worries, and so on.

So just keep exploring that, and experiencing it through practice, whether it is formally on the cushion or also try to explore it in other circumstances of your life where you're on your own, and you don't have to interact with other people, or when doing the dishes, or you're walking, or in the park or elsewhere, try to cultivate this. A very important point is, we don't have to suppress thoughts as if they were enemies. They are not enemies; actually they are the natural creativity of mind. And that's fine, really. And they can play, they come and they go, sometimes they're not here, sometimes they're there, and it doesn't matter. What we learn to do through calm-abiding is not to be dragged into their story.

So we can observe them; I compare them to the Sirens in the Odyssey, when Ulysses wants to hear the songs of the Sirens that are supposed to be beautiful, he asked his crew to tie him to the mast, and has them plug their ears, and instructs his crew that no matter what he says, not to let him loose. So it's the same idea, he can enjoy the song of the Sirens without being dragged into the high reef and the shore and then be devoured by them. So it's kind of an interesting metaphor for me for calm-abiding, when I think about it, you know? We can see the production of mind, the creation of mind, the natural creativity of mind, and because we are tethered to the pole of this object, we're not overboard. So this is something we need to cultivate more. As we sit formally on the cushion, and as we are doing things and so on.

Now, concerning sickness and so on. What you describe, first, thanks for your honesty that “you will be scared.” But what I want to add to this, it might happen, but actually, what you know of what will be your reaction to suffering is what you know now, and it’s mostly speculation. You can speculate that you will be brave or you can speculate that you will be scared, but you don’t know. It’s only when push comes to shove that you know what you have in stock, what you have in yourself. If you have prepared yourself. As I said, preparation is important; if you prepared yourself to be brave and courageous and dedicated to understanding and trained enough to be able to use all the methods that are described in this text because you have applied them already on the smaller scale, so when it comes to the bigger scale you find that actually you have the resources it takes. So the anxiety you might have is maybe only the anxiety of now; it’s probably not the anxiety of then, because then, again this is speculation, you won’t have anxiety, you’ll be crushed if you’re not prepared, and if you have anxiety you’ll work with it. So the anxiety is the anxiety of now.

Emotion is one word, thought is another word, what does it really mean? Emotion is what you think about and what you conceive and how you react to a contact. If it’s through physicality, a contact that is deemed or evaluated by the mind as unpleasant, then you have a thought about it...it’s still a thought; it’s still just a thought. I often use this example of one thing that happened to me. I decided to swim in a mountain river around Easter, because I thought it was a good idea. It was so cold that it felt hot. There was a moment when my mind sort of read the physical contact of my skin with the water as boiling, and then there was a quick readjustment of my mental consciousness that thought, “It can’t be boiling, it’s a mountain brook in April, so it is cold. Actually it was a very interesting experience, I went from being boiling to being frozen in a split second. And none of this exists really, outside of the labeling. My body didn’t tell me, I am cold. The mind said: “I read this as cold.” “I read this as boiling.” So it was not a physical problem. It might have become one, I might have died, because if I spent too long, my body might have shut down. First and foremost was the reaction of the mind.

So you can sort of learn to deal with this as you’ve learned to deal with other thoughts. And I think that’s gonna be a very important mastery you come to, if anybody has this, though I wish not. But if you come to acute long- lasting pain, like migraines, or the suffering that one goes through with cancer or whatever, where excruciating and endless suffering night and day. If you’re not able to dissociate it’s going to be difficult. Now if you have a little training you will progress extremely quickly if you go through this experience, assuming that you have the dedication and the courage to say, like, “I need to work through this, there is no other way.”

You might find something that you would never, you could never have expected before. So I totally believe in the necessity of preparation, and I don’t worry too much about my reaction when this might happen. First, I don’t know if it will happen, second, I have no idea what my reaction is. I can say now, “I will be brave,” and lie, and I can say, “I will be scared,” and not be accurate. I don’t know. So I don’t want to waste my time now with the anxiety or the speculation about how I might

react; it's "I don't know." And I'd rather use this time to prepare myself by cultivating the awareness of the distance through calm-abiding and so on and so forth in relation to thoughts or projects, because you know when you have projects and ideas and then anxiety whether it will work or not, these are just aggregates of thoughts.

I don't know if we can really picture what our reaction will be. If we work on preparing ourselves now, when we have the leisure, even if we don't work with preparing ourselves, things can be revealed that we have totally not suspected. I don't know if you have heard of Viktor Frankl, the Austrian psychoanalyst who went through the terrible experience of Auschwitz, and then he found what became his calling and what became logotherapy which he promoted. He had tremendous revelations through his process in Auschwitz; he saw people who seemed to be strong that were crumbling, and people who you would never bet a cent on that were, I wouldn't exactly say thriving, but you move from a logical reality. Like the story of one person in Auschwitz who saw one of the SS killing a man for nothing, and he asked why, and the SS replied, "There is no why here." So when you are in this world, and I don't want to compare Auschwitz and cancer, but you are beyond rational politeness and the conventional reality we have. Something is kindled, and you have no idea what this is going to be until the moment when you go through it. You don't know if you're gonna be a hero or a coward, if you're gonna cave or if you're gonna thrive. But I put my bet on, if you are prepared, and emotionally you've been through some of your nights and your gray area and you learn to work with it for awhile, that you are better equipped. You've got all the tools. The tool is practice, study *The Path to Awakening*, study *Boundless Wisdom*, you've got all the tools, and then everyday, practice them, practice them, on the cushion, and in action, practice them all the time. Step by step, that's how we do it.

*Q: It seems like there are beings, bodhisattvas, or others, that are at a deeper level and here to support us, even though I can't necessarily yet relate to them. I feel like eventually I will feel them. Can you expand on this?*

A: Yeah, we are doing the work but we are well surrounded. And well supported. Now the question is whether we are open to this presence, and whether we are taking refuge in the Sangha, to take the classic terminology. Are we taking refuge in the Sangha? Are you taking refuge in all the supportive opportunities around you? To illustrate this I will tell you the story of a man who was drowning, he's drowning and the rescuers come to him in a boat and try to get him in and he said, "No, only God will help me." And then a swimmer came to help him and bring him to shore, and he said again, "No, no, only God will help me." Then a helicopter came and the rescuers said, "We will save you..." "No, God will help me." And the guy dies. And he comes to heaven and sees God and the first thing he does is reproach God. "What have you done?" And God says, "What have I done? I sent you a boat, a swimmer, and a helicopter and you were so dumb to refuse them all. Why are you bothering me with your stupid mind?"

So how open are we to this? As you mentioned, there are people around us that have social titles like Lama or Rinpoche or Rabbi or Priest or whatever, you name it, but we always sort of select them and say they are good according to our own appreciation. Like, "Yeah, this one is too old, this one is

too young, this one is too Asian, this one is too Western, too this, too that, so we close the possibility of listening. We need to cultivate a sense of appreciation and deep listening, so that the socially recognized teachers, the holders of the lineage, can help you and share the Dharma with you; the books can also talk to you, the books of the tradition, the books of wisdom can talk to you, but in the larger sense nature can also talk to you, all phenomena can talk to you, and they can always bring you back to the point. The question is, are you listening? The help is around, and whether you want to call them bodhisattvas or angels or guardian spirits or whatever, they are always present.

Do you know this Wim Wenders movie *So Close, So Far*? He made it in Berlin, the sky above Berlin, and it's the story of angels. They are basically, like, listening, but they can barely intervene because the people are so caught up with their lives that they cannot listen to them. So I think it boils down to the fact of listening or not listening; when we listen we can receive a lot. And we can appreciate. We are not alone. The Sangha for me, on many levels, on the highest level, are the great bodhisattvas like the Gyalwa Karmapa or Shamar Rinpoche, the great bodhisattvas, but on a more common level the Sangha "nextdoor," men and women of experience who are willing to help you, they are all pulling the cart in the same direction, they are all doing their job...of making it available. You know the saying, "You can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink."

Also I don't think we should be afraid that we are left alone. Sometimes it seems that we are left and we have no direction, but there are plenty of directions given to us, and we just have to listen; take one and start following. It's like a thread, it's like Ariadne's thread to help get out of the maze. You have to find it and just follow the string and then you come out of the maze. That's what Dharma is.

*Q: One of the things that today's teaching opened up for me is realizing that, for instance in Tonglen, that not only can we breathe in others' suffering and breathe out happiness, but we can also breathe in happiness. Sometimes it seems that happiness "belongs" to us individually, when actually the collective happiness is so gratifying and joyful.*

A: One word from Kalu Rinpoche who said, "Wherever there is an act of unconditional love, there is the presence of Chenrezig." Wherever, whatever form this love has. And this teacher who lives in Arizona, Garchen Rinpoche, an elder teacher, a great teacher, his own teacher was Khenpo Munsel Rinpoche, and he met him in detention in a Communist China cells in Tibet, when they were both arrested and tortured and beaten and so on. That's where he met his teacher. And his teacher taught him, secretly, because they were not supposed to even recite a mantra or, like if someone was even caught mumbling they were beaten because they were accused of reciting mantras. So he gave him the transmission on mind-training. And the best place to practice it. Khenpo Munsel Rinpoche, in his oral instruction says, "Happiness and suffering, they are one." There is one happiness and there is one suffering. We discriminate. This is my happiness, this is your happiness. Your happiness is like that, my happiness is like this. But actually, beyond your own definition, when you're happy you're happy, when you are in pain you're in pain; everyone has the same.

When you share your joy in Tonglen when you breathe out, your joy expands, and you could say it meets the joy of others, but really it's the same one. In a way when you breathe your joy out, you let go of the little shell of "my" happiness. What was "your" happiness becomes happiness. And suffering. When you breathe in you're not taking it really. Actually because "their" suffering and "your" suffering is suffering. Your suffering has different characteristics and your reaction, also, has different characteristics and so on, but the bottom line is, it's suffering. It's painful. So when you breathe in the suffering, you actually crack the shell of "my" little suffering, that makes it heavy. Heavy, heavy and painful. My suffering.....suffering. If you relax the mind from this excessive self-centeredness, And you can accompany this with the words, "May all of us be free from suffering and the cause of suffering." If you want to name it, but again, it's another shell. Suffering.

And then Gendun Rinpoche was teaching Tonglen in this way, he said, "First, you need to have a little bit of words. You conceive other people, you open up to their suffering, you realize yours, and then you're breathing in suffering, you're breathing out happiness. First you need that. But then progressively you're just on the movement of inhale, exhale, inhale suffering, exhale happiness." It's less descript, if you will, it's more like a feeling. And then you keep going, and it's just like the movement of the ocean. The tides, coming and going. There's actually not even "this one is happiness, and this one is suffering." And then eventually you connect with the ocean of mind, which is the union of emptiness and compassion. It reveals your Buddha nature. You appear to yourself as a Buddha. Quite surprised! In the very critical moments, Gendun Rinpoche said, "For the prepared mind, death is not death, death is enlightenment." It's realization. Because that's the most extreme thing we can go through, and then if we can go through it and use it properly, that's enlightenment. Literally enlightenment at the moment of death. And this requires a life preparation. Life is a rehearsal. And death is "le grande premiere." The first, and maybe the last.

*Q: Regarding when we experience suffering, and with these instructions it seems possible to practice. Is it shinay? And I wanted to connect that as well to ngondro. I remember the teaching of Gendun Rinpoche when he encouraged feeling joy when suffering comes up, during prostrations for instance; should we go searching for the suffering? Or just relax and wait for it to come along anyway...?*

A: No, I don't think you have to spend too much time searching for suffering, it will find you. And we could use our time to be better prepared to receive her and have a party. Regarding what Gendun Rinpoche said about the suffering, he said it's true, if you look at any form of suffering you have, like for example you do prostrations as part of the preliminary practices, and when I was doing the prostrations we had five weeks to do 100,000 prostrations, everyday I was praying to God, I was praying, "God, if you exist, kill me now. It was so painful. And Rinpoche was saying, "Well, this is nothing compared to the hell." It's a tradeoff. You know, your back is hurting, your knees are hurting, this is a 100,00 years in burning hell. It's a good deal, appreciate it.

That reminds me of the story of a woman who is driving out of Las Vegas, and there is a Native American woman who is hitchhiking, the woman stops and picks up the hitchhiker, who doesn't

speak at all. Not a word. So they drove for miles, past Barstow, all the way to Los Angeles, where the hitchhiker asked to get out. As she stepped out of the car she noticed a bottle of whiskey rolling around on the floor of the passenger side, and the driver explained, "Oh, I got that in Vegas for my husband." And the Native American woman looked at her and said, "Good deal!"

So if you can trade off your bad husband for a bottle of good whiskey, that's a good deal. If you can trade off the little suffering, that you make a mountain out of, the slight discomfort of prostrations, and then if you understand that you're trading that for a lot of suffering that might come, you know like you're uprooting a little thing, and that might become a huge tree in the future, even if there was some effort involved, the result, the outcome, is great. That's a source of joy. That's a source of joy, because otherwise, everything becomes painful. You know? Let's say you want to become a bodhisattva and you want to help, and so on, but working with all these people is just so exhausting...every time you think of the you think they're going to eat you up and so you hate them for that, but since you're a bodhisattva you keep smiling. So you smile and you hate being that because you hate fake-smiling but also, doing the task of a bodhisattva is exhausting and you don't want to do it. So you have a black heart and a smile.

If you are dealing with suffering and you are reluctant, again, suffering is a personal subjective reality. And for some people your suffering means nothing, and for you this effort is the most you can give. You know when you go to the hospital and then they want to help you with the pain, to ease the pain, they ask you, "On a scale of 1 to 10, where are you?" And you're like, "Uh, 20..!!!" And some other people would say, "0.05." It helps us to get a sense of the relativity of what we go through, because we might build up resentment. Like, going back to my time, five weeks, 100,000 prostrations, you know, "Why do we have to do that. Why can't we do it over three years, nicely, whenever we feel like it?" It's because that doesn't boil up and brings us to the point where it is uncomfortable enough so that you have to work with it. That's where something happens. If there is not some sort of pressure and difficulty you remain in your ordinary comfort; it's manageable. So it's kind of a way to take you out of your comfort zone....and it's not extreme, really. If you were told to do three thousand prostrations everyday, and you will lose twenty pounds, you will do it happily. Now if you're going to reach enlightenment, I don't care, it's painful. We're a funny people, aren't we? And actually I lost a lot of weight during the prostrations, I should do some more now. I didn't care then. When you do the last prostration, you are so happy!

A friend of mine was part of the first retreat, and when he was younger he was a biker, so he had a super fast racy motorcycle, and then he had an accident. His leg was badly damaged, he could hardly bend it. And he had to do the prostrations, like us, and he managed to push through and do almost all of the prostrations, but there was just like the last five prostrations, he got into such an anger, he threw the cushion which he was putting his knees on when he was prostrating into the shrine,[Crash] And left the session. He was 5 prostrations away!!! And he was so frustrated....but then he learned something. He had to do that, and the transformation happened in the 5 last prostrations. Sometimes we called it the prustrations.

And all of that is just the play of mind and it's little stories about "me" and my hope for enlightenment and the price I want, or don't want, to pay for it, or eat your cake and still have it, these kinds of things. That's what we are actually learning about when we do the prostrations. And some people learn it through other ways, but it's the same thing you have to learn, one way or another, that's part of the preliminary practice; you have to learn this about yourself. And you have to overcome it, you have to pass beyond this and grow, and be ready for the next step, thanks to this preliminary work. Remember, Gampopa said, "The preliminaries are 90% of the path." So after that it's all gravy, it's fine.

*Q: I happen to be thinking about a passage from the little Lojong book, about the four activities. There's one about making offerings to malevolent forces. "Whenever obstacles arise due to malevolent and obstructing forces, offer them tormas with a deeply grateful frame of mind." I don't really understand what those forces are, but I was thinking that actually, they are helpful in the ways we are talking about suffering, they push us, and basically everything you already said. But my question is, does this mean to lean into the suffering, this passage from the book? To be grateful even when things seem negative because it's a teacher?*

A: That's very much a line for Tibetans. You know, the demons, Doen in Tibetan. And Trungpa Rinpoche described it as doen, a sudden overwhelming neurotic attack. The Tibetans gave them names, like we give names like schizophrenia, paranoia, we have this terminology, and in Tibetan they give them names and they give them faces. And of course it has to do with the cultural background of Tibet and praying in a Buddhist temple, for dealing with local spirits and so on and so forth, and so now in our context what is this doen? The attack of the doen? It's like suddenly we are overwhelmed with a wave of neurotic reaction to some sort of stimulation, you know, that triggered that. You have a fit, you throw a tantrum, over nothing. A little thing went off and that just drove you bonkers. You just lose it. And even that can be part of the path.

So what is the given torma, what means torma? Tor means to throw away. It's a ransom, it's a little gift, it's a thingy you give them. If you throw a tantrum, you have to give this mind a little thing to calm down. "Okay, I understand you're mad, let's have a piece of chocolate." That's the torma. "Let's have a coffee." Or, maybe coffee's not such a good idea. Maybe a glass of wine? Chill out. You give them a little something, not because you try to suppress them or control them, whatever, you just give them a torma, a little thingy, to defuse, like you would defuse a landmine. You unplug it, defuse the situation. Because when I have this attack of doen, it grows out of proportion, and I'm just surprised. Like, who possessed me? I don't recognize myself anymore. If there is not something that is going to defuse this, de-escalate, I can kill somebody. This advice is an advice regarding de-escalation. And give a little thingy, whatever; de-escalate.

Don't suppress violence with, like, "You're wrong, shut up," because it's an overwhelming sudden neurotic attack, sudden, out of the blue. Overwhelming, takes all the space. Neurotic, based on misconception. Attack, because it hurts. That's a doen. And doen, like gods, as in gods and demons, like Machik Labdreun says, "There is no god and demon, the eight classes of gods and demons do

not exist outside of the mind.” So it’s the mind. It’s just mind that, you know, your mind that used to be nice cream, turned into whipped cream. Or your beautiful oil mind turned into mayo, because it was stirred up. Okay? So, defuse, de-escalate, chill, by giving a little thingy. Whatever would be helpful at the time.

Because you could consider the doens as outer demons, and they may manifest as such, but they’re just the expression of mind. They appear to be external, but they are not. So that would be an interpretation of this mind in our language in our culture. There are many lines like this in *Seven Points of Mind Training*, it’s a quite ancient text, and it’s very culturally marked. There are a lot of things, like don’t give the load of a donkey to a yak or a cow, what, you could say like, what you carry in your pick-up don’t carry on your bicycle. That could be an explanation for us; we need to readjust all these proverbs or examples to fit our times.

*Q: But why the deeply grateful frame of mind, why would you be grateful?*

A: Because we have revealed to ourselves that we could “kill” someone if we’re not cautious. Like, “Thank you for showing me, I thought I was in control of my mind, thank you for showing me I am not. Again, it becomes an opportunity to take refuge, to cultivate mindfulness, to decide not to follow a negative lifestyle and embrace a positive lifestyle and find joy in doing it; it’s a reminder. It’s a reminder that I’m easily, easily put off. It shows everything that is unpleasant, let’s say, shows where I have to work.

Everything that is pleasant, is showing me where I am attached. So I don’t have best friends, you know, they are my guru. They’re my teacher. Also one of many gurus. One of the many teachers.

Most people are pushing our buttons. They’re the push-your-buttons gurus. You know the story of Atisha. Once he was invited to Tibet, and he heard that the Tibetan people were so tame and so nice, and so on, and so he decided to bring his attendant with him who was Bengali, and who was a curmudgeon and was always angry and complaining, because he said, “If I’m in Tibet with all these nice people who, is going to push my buttons? Who’s going to challenge me?” So he took his servant with him, and when he realized that Tibetans are actually as bad as the rest of the world, he sent his servant back home, no need after all.

It’s not easy at first to recognize that all of these button-pushing gurus are friends, because we want tranquility, we don’t want to be disturbed, we want not to be exposed as easily angered or whatever, we want to keep our composure and so whatever destroys our public image, we hate it. And in Tibet, because they were very strong at building up a public image of holiness, you know, the Lamas were virtuous, and everything was virtuous and so on, there was also a lot of underground things happening, so they had also some of these button-pushing gurus, like Drukpa Kunley, or some also they called nyonpas, you know, crazy, crazy yogis that were exposing the fraud of the commonly accepted well-behaved, what we call here political correctness. So this was a very good balance, because you have positive examples, but you might also have an excess of hypocrisy, and so you had

crazy people who were pointing out hypocrisy, so that was sort of correcting everything, you wouldn't fall into one extreme or another. And it's really funny, the encounter of these crazy yogis with the politically correct monastics, it's hilarious.

The first one I met was in 1981 in Rumtek in Sikkim, when I was there during the funeral of the 16th Karmapa. We stayed at Shamar Rinpoche's mother's house, she very kindly hosted us, and there was one of the nyonpa, one of these crazy yogis was living around the monastery and he had family and he was wearing the white cotton cloth, well, it used to be white but it was more like black now, and his job was to resurface the grinding stones that they use for making tsampa. His job was to come and chisel this, and then he would usually stay after he did his job and share dinner and they would offer him some beer, these crazy yogis are supposed to like a little beer, and alcohol and so on, and he asked me if I could do something. He had two pens and two pieces of paper and with his two hands he made two perfect circles. So he said, "Can you do that?" And I was young and arrogant, so I said, "Sure, I can do that, no problem." And then, pfft, two potatoes, you know? I couldn't make it, I was totally not synchronized. And then he started making fun of me, saying, "Oh, the nice looking monk who is supposed to have control over his mind and doesn't even have control of his hands!" So these kinds of people exist; that's really good. And you don't know if he's really crazy drunk or if he's an enlightened person, you don't know, there's no way to know. And it doesn't matter, when they teach you, if you learn something then this was a great teaching.