

Transforming Problems into Happiness

by Lama Zopa Rinpoche

- Foreword by HHDL
 - The Purpose of Life
 - Developing a Different Attitude to Problems
 - Happiness and Suffering are created by Your Mind
 - The Shortcomings of Anger and Desire
 - Transforming your Problems into the Path
 - Experiencing your Problems for Others
 - The Heart Advice
-

FOREWORD BY HHDL

There are Two kinds of Happiness:

1. Physical Comfort
2. Stable Mind

Sensual pleasure alone can never bring the mind peace. Inversely, mental strength/happiness is a higher order of happiness, being able to dispel physical discomfort.

What is the purpose of Mind Training (Lo-Jong)?

“The Buddha explained many methods and paths by which we can purify our minds and achieve the fully awakened state of buddhahood.” (p.vii)

This state of being is known as bodhicitta, the awakened mind.

To achieve this, you must engage in thought patterns that genuinely express concern for others and turn adversity into an advantage (both for others and yourself).

This state of being is central to the Tibetan character, and is responsible for the perseverance Tibetans have in keeping their dignity and resolve in the face of great difficulties past and present.

Zopa Rinpoche has done extensive research and personally engaged with the highest forms of mind training; he draws from a wealth of experience that arises from back a long lineage of adept masters and scholars. I ask of the reader to not only read and absorb his teachings but also to make every attempt to practice as he does. There is no doubt that active participants will notice a change in their mental attitudes over time as you they become more disciplined and positive in their practice. And your own sense of happiness will become clear as you begin to contribute to the greater happiness of others.

THE PURPOSE OF LIFE

“The purpose of having this precious human body is not simply to achieve happiness for oneself, but to eliminate the suffering of all other beings and to bring them happiness as well.” (p.2)

In Tibetan, it is called Dal-jor, which means an endowment of freedom, or in other words, the responsibility that one has to take in this precious opportunity of being a human being on earth in this unique period of time.

We human beings, unlike other sentient beings, have an extraordinary capacity, which we sometimes take for granted until it is called to our attention.

Everyone wants happiness; no one wants suffering.

“The happiness we need is not just ordinary, fleeting happiness; what we really need is ultimate happiness, the unsurpassed, unshakable happiness of [an awakened mind].” (p.2)

In this way, humans are always pursuing what they perceive has the most durable and rewarding happiness available to them.

When you lack wisdom, then you will never be aware of higher forms of happiness that are already at your disposal because of having your precious human body. There is no need of any more external sources for the highest source to reveal itself.

An awakened mind is the highest possible form of happiness, as it is self-perpetuating and grants an irreversible passage away from suffering.

Once you know this can be achieved, you actively wish to achieve it. With the right understanding, it is clear that you want this benefit for all living beings.

However, to have proper understanding, you need to engage with all characteristics of the mind. Furthermore, because all living beings have their unique attitudes and aptitudes, no one method is effective. You must be able to be open to a variety of paths, all of which will lead to an awakened mind.

Tibetan masters have developed a progressive path that gradually eases us towards the path we seek—it is known as Lamrim. This path is a condensed volume of the Buddha's teachings; it is thousands of verses distilled into an essence that everyone, even non-Buddhists, can follow.

“In order to succeed in listening to, reflecting on, and meditating on the graduated path to enlightenment for the benefit and happiness of all sentient beings, you must practice [mind training]” (p.3)

DEVELOPING A DIFFERENT ATTITUDE TO PROBLEMS

The current dysfunctional world does not allow us to see problems/obstacles as the potential to cultivating happiness because we are so focused on present, or future, suffering.

Without mind training, you cannot see these opportunities.

The ordinary mind cannot suddenly change to accept this perception. You must engage in a gradual process that begins on a small scale but later ends with you experiencing all obstacles as a necessary condition for achieving happiness.

Thought transformation does not entail removing, or ignoring, problems, but rather to see the cause and conditions that make them present and being able to recognize them for what they really are. To see their true nature and their true origin. Once you have this recognition, they cannot disturb you.

To begin this transformation, you must accomplish two things:

1. Stop the complete aversion to suffering.
2. Generate the thought of welcoming problems.

Harm and general suffering are plentiful, and comes to us from innumerable sources and circumstances.

If all we see is suffering in problems, then we will only be ever more averse to people and conditions that disturb us.

“The smallest, most insignificant matter will cause great pain in our mind, and we will become upset very quickly.” (p.7)

The true origin of our suffering, and of our fear/aversion, is not the external object we perceive as suffering or causing suffering, but rather our strongly selfish ordinary mind.

If our mind is tested and disturbed by even a small change we see as unacceptable, then suffering comes easy, and without end. To misjudge the scale and urgency of problems makes us numb to the ones that truly must be addressed.

“It is the nature of the mind to become addicted to certain ways of seeing things... Our mind exaggerates problems, and we find that our life is filled with irritation, depression, paranoia... We are constantly overwhelmed by our completely unhappy mind, and it is very hard for us to be happy for one day, for even one hour.” (p.8)

If we do not realize that it is our self-centered mind, which has been trained by us or our culture to accept this exaggerated sense of negativity and displeasure as the source of our problems, then happiness will never be in our control.

The more we see problems as arising from external sources, the more we seek happiness from external sources as well. Therefore, if we perceive both sources as the same, there will never be satisfaction.

The trained mind does not experience this outward grasping. The trained mind will seek only the internal source of suffering and address it. The trained mind will see the external only as potential sources to strengthen the internal resolve.

When you encounter the conditions that generate our problems, your mind will know to adjust its approach; your mind will know that there is no benefit in blaming them as a source of suffering because us with ordinary minds have already experienced the results of failing to do so.

Likewise, your mind must understand its limits. While still having an ordinary mind, we are imperfect. There will be some problems we can right now disassociate with suffering without effort, but there will be others that we must endure with careful control.

Master Shantideva writes: “If the problem can be resolved, there is no need to be overly concerned or disturbed. On the other hand, if nothing can be done to resolve the difficulty, it is useless to feel unhappy about it.”

Therefore, no matter what happens, there is no point in being angry or depressed. In no circumstance is it appropriate to think otherwise.

Think back to each situation you encountered previously in your life and that you have identified as a problem. What has been the constant result of seeing them as problems? Has it ever benefited you?

If these problems ever resulted in a positive change, or a reward, have these positive results come from focusing on the suffering? No, each has come from the strength you have had in your mind. So to now generate the belief that it is your mind that needs training, to now have the determined attitude to not flee from suffering, is the path towards transformation. To have the positive result be the outcome each time.

“To transform problems into happiness, it is not sufficient simply to see that problems *help* your practice of virtue. This alone is not enough. You must clearly recognize that your problems are actually *necessary* conditions for your practice of virtue, and you can derive continual, stable happiness from this.” (p.11)

“It is not enough to hear me say these things; this has to come from your own experience.” (p.11)

But do not directly engage these new thought patterns with the biggest obstacles currently present in your mind. Instead remember this is a gradual habituation that has greater success from continual small victories as opposed to tackling the most difficult challenge and risking disheartening defeat. So start instead with just ceasing any thoughts of disliking problems, generate right now the resolve to start liking them. This will start you on the gradual path towards true happiness.

HAPPINESS AND SUFFERING ARE CREATED BY YOUR MIND

“All happiness and all suffering depend on our wish, our motivation.” (p.16)

With few exceptions, everything we do out of our selfish concerns result in suffering. If we shift our motivation to be for others, we will become the source of happiness and be able to possess happiness.

As we start to develop this motivation, happiness becomes plentiful, and we then wish to perform these positive actions everyday.

We can quickly realize how our mind is the vehicle that leads us to this happiness time and again. Everything depends completely on our mind, and its persistent motivation.

Likewise, all suffering stems from misguided motivation. Even chasing what we perceive as happiness for selfish reasons in fact results in suffering. To always seek that kind of temporal happiness results in an endless cycle of dissatisfaction.

In this way, our interpretation of the reality before us is the gateway to either happiness or suffering. It is the direct result of the way in which you take care of your own mind in your life on a day-to-day basis. Only you can influence the final result.

Power of will is still not enough. You need to internalize the right understanding. When you come to understand problems as having the benefit of increasing your happiness, you can then realize, “This situation is not a problem. I am not suffering; I am happy.”

“The happiness that appears to exist externally, out there, is empty; it exists in dependence upon the nature of the feeling and the thought that labels it.” (p.17)

The same is for suffering. When you encounter a circumstance that you label in your mind as only having the potential to bring problems, then your mind will only see it in that narrow way.

“The status of “problem” is merely imputed to that particular feeling by the thought that labels it.” (p.18)

What then is it that perceives something as happiness or suffering, since our thoughts and will do not constitute us completely? There is nothing substantial that can attach happiness or suffering to us, and likewise no way we can label external things as being made of happiness or suffering. To think otherwise is false as the concepts of happiness and suffering cannot exist without our mind labeling things as such.

If you conceptualize the existence of an object, the ordinary mind perceives it as existing independent of other things. But when we try to identify which exact thing is what we have labeled, we cannot find it. We can examine each and every piece, but we can never be satisfied that we have found the one thing that embodies the label alone and completely. We only see collections of smaller things that together we can label as the object.

This applies to us as well. Whether we think ourselves as either our body parts, mental structures, or the spirit, we can never locate that true essence without having to refer to its other parts as well. Buddhists call these collections of parts by the Sanskrit word Skandhas, but we can use the English word aggregates to represent these collectives. Without these aggregates, we can't imagine a self, or any other object, without them.

Thinking in this way, we can should never be overwhelmed by suffering, as it cannot exist by itself without us enabling it.

“What this means is that there is no point at all in becoming attached or angry in response to anything that occurs. Because our experiences are empty of existing in this way, we don't have to experience them as problems. We can totally abandon disturbing thoughts.” (p.19)

THE SHORTCOMINGS OF ANGER AND DESIRE

“From your own experience, you know that there is no mental peace when you do not control your mind, when you follow anger.” (p.22)

However, there is always peace with patience, loving-kindness, and compassion. Furthermore, it is especially important to practice these during disturbing circumstances that produce negative thoughts.

The first step to practicing this control is to be fully aware of the disruption in your mind simultaneously as it is occurring. As soon as anger or desire arises, you need to recognize them for what they are.

When you become aware of their presence, you also reflect on their outcomes. As discussed before, these thoughts always result in suffering, for you and others.

If you become controlled by negative thoughts, they become your mind’s only focus, and they leave an imprint that allows for habituation to form. Without being aware of the danger, it will become ever easier for your mind to default to anger or desire. And when this happens, even a small disturbance, a mere moment, can result in extreme outcomes.

“The antidote to anger is patience. Each angry thought must be countered with a patient thought, for the angry thought itself cannot recollect the drawbacks of anger. We can only remember the shortcomings of anger by practicing patience.” (p.23)

If you are disturbed by desire you will always find that something is missing within you. If you examine your state of mind, you will identify a void of your own making that is presently wishing to be filled. To engage in this kind of self-indulgence, you will always be able to find something you perceive as personally lacking. It can become an endless hunger that is never satisfied.

“Even in moments of excitement, if you carefully examine your mind, you will discover the feeling that something is still missing and you are not perfectly content... You will always find that there is still something missing, that you are looking for something more.” (p.24)

We follow desire because of the sense of satisfaction it brings to us. But it is a hollow sense of satisfaction because it is always empty and needing for renewal. Therefore, the true outcome is dissatisfaction. Desire is suffering.

So then what causes continual suffering in our life? It is following desire, desire for the purpose of satisfying our selfish ordinary mind. The self-centered mindset always has something missing.

“Until you recognize and label the feeling as a problem, until you identify it as the suffering of suffering, you impute “pleasure” to the experience of having sense contact with an object you have labeled “desirable.” Because you have called it “pleasure,” the feeling appears as pleasure—seeming even to exist as pleasure [on its own volition]. In other words, although the feeling is only labeled “pleasure,” the pleasure appears to exist inherently.” (p.26)

This pleasure that stems from desire is always fleeting. It is only a question of time. Once it begins to fade we start to become miserable. It is then that it explicitly reveals itself to the ordinary mind as suffering. But the reality is that it was suffering from the moment we allowed the thought to exist in our mind.

“Whenever we encounter any object or situation, one of three types of feeling is experienced, all of which are suffering. If we identify the object or situation as a problem, we will experience a feeling of suffering. If we identify an object or situation as desirable, we will experience a feeling of pleasure, but even this feeling of pleasure, when examined fully, is suffering. Finally, if we encounter an object that is neither desirable nor undesirable, a feeling of indifference will arise, and this too is ultimately suffering.” (p.26)

“It is important then to realize that even the feeling that arises when you come into contact with an object of desire, which you label “pleasure,” is only a form of suffering... Because of your delusion, because of your hallucination, the suffering

feeling appears to you as pleasure... it appears to your hallucinating mind as pure, truly existent happiness. In this way all suffering comes from your own mind.”
(p.27)

To stop this cycle from continuing, you must remove its root/source. You must eliminate the self-centered nature that creates desire, and thus suffering. Once you realize that desire is the root, you wish to be free from it. Only by training your mind can you accomplish this.

“By seeing the shortcomings of desire, you stop your problems, you cut them off at the root. When you can do this, you will experience satisfaction and happiness in your daily life... Cutting off desire liberates you.” (p.28)

TRANSFORMING YOUR PROBLEMS INTO THE PATH

“In these difficult times, obstacles to practicing [mind training] and achieving ultimate happiness are so numerous that you simply cannot avoid them.” (p.32)

All moments must be taken advantage of. You must be aware in the present.

You must be aware of false contentment. When you are in a comfortable state, in which you believe you have met all satisfactory conditions, you know because of the laws of change and impermanence that they will not last forever. When this change does occur, you can put at risk all your accumulated discipline if you are not prepared for the rush of potential disappointment that will come when you come short.

These situations will surely come. But each problem should strengthen rather than weaken your training.

“When you encounter an undesirable situation, a thought arises that interprets your experience as a problem, and this causes suffering. The only way to stop that suffering is to give rise to another thought that recognizes and interprets your experiences as happiness.” (p.33)

Learn to enjoy the obstacle, for your mind will gradually be impervious to changes that come constantly. This strength will effortlessly result in happiness.

“There is always a meditation to mix with whatever suffering you experience. Not every problem should be approached the same way... When you are able to apply the teachings skillfully in this way, all sufferings can be mixed with virtue... all experiences of suffering become virtue.” (p.34)

“Outline each [technique]. It is very important to think in detail of the benefits of problems, since this is the main method of generating with increasingly greater strength and determination the thought of liking miserable conditions.” (p.34)

To minimize the impact of change and increase the benefit of problems, reflect back that it is the mind that has been labeling the circumstance. Reflect and think how it is you that has created the problem, and not that the problem has come to you because you believe you deserve it. When you stop to think of outcomes as judgments you deserve, their effects are lessened, even the unbearable becomes bearable.

Think instead of those that are burdened with truly great suffering. How they must endure with even less than us, with no thought that the path away from suffering is available to them.

“These people do not even have the means to create the cause of happiness and abandon the cause of suffering.” (p.36)

Their situations and minds are closed, but their problems also offer us the opportunity to reflect on ourselves and to practice our newfound compassion.

“When you think of other people with greater problems, your own problems seem very small and bearable. And when your big problems become small, it is even easier to see your problems as almost pleasurable. When you think in this way, you no longer dislike miserable conditions. That feeling of aversion disappears.” (p.36)

But be mindful of a sense of pride when comparing your situation to that of others. “Pride seems to be our friend, but in reality it only brings us endless [suffering]... Pride focuses on the [flaws] of others and exaggerates your own good qualities.” (p.39)

With pride you are blind to others and yourself. You can neglect your own suffering, or rejoice when you see it in others instead of actively wishing for them to be free as well.

“When you realize that you yourself have many [flaws], and you recollect them, pride does not arise.” (p.39)

“It is not good to be praised; it is better to be criticized. When you are praised, great pride arises. When you are criticized, your own mistake is blown away.” (p.39)

Practice feeling happy for others, with all their accomplishments, no matter how small. The act of rejoicing and taking their happiness as your own, will not allow pride to take form. Cherish others as you cherish yourself.

“If you cherish only yourself, you cannot experience happiness, but if you cherish others as you cherish yourself, happiness arises naturally... if someone finds the happiness they were seeking, you naturally feel happy, without any need to think of reasons.” (p.41)

Likewise, rejoicing will impede jealousy from arising. Jealousy takes shape when you wish for others to have less happiness, or you feel miserable by comparing what you perceive as having less satisfaction than someone else.

“But if you abandon jealousy and practice rejoicing, even though you yourself may not be successful now, you create the cause to be successful and happy in the future.” (p.41)

“If I want happiness, if I desire the absence of this problem, I must create the cause for happiness and the cause for the absence of this problem.” (p.45)

All actions, everyday, present the opportunity for you to become the cause of happiness, for yourself and others. If you do not recognize this, then you have become complacent in your practice and are setting yourself in a position to suffer once more. But the opportunities are plentiful, and the active student can take full advantage. Even if it is small, the fact that these actions are countless means moments of continual happiness are potentially unending.

This compassion towards others will bring us closer. Even if we share the same problems, those with the trained mind can skillfully lessen their impact, or remove them altogether. This attitude can be shared and encourage those around us.

“Just as I want happiness and do not want suffering, everyone else also wants happiness and does not want suffering. In this way, we are all exactly the same. How good it would be if all these beings were freed from all their sufferings.” (p.46)

“When you have a problem, you are devoid of temporal and ultimate happiness. Remember all the other beings who are also without temporal and ultimate happiness. You and they are exactly the same in wanting happiness. Think: “How

wonderful it would be if all living beings had happiness.” Furthermore, think: “I myself will endeavor to cause each and every being to have happiness.”” (p.47)

EXPERIENCING YOUR PROBLEMS FOR OTHERS

“As your compassion for others grows, you increasingly come to feel that it is unbearable when any other being experiences suffering.” (p.50)

The transition from the ordinary mind to the enlightened mind means renouncing yourself rather than others and cherishing others rather than yourself. The enlightened mind wishes for everyone to be free from suffering. Without this selfless wish, suffering will always be possible, and you will never be free from it, either for yourself or others.

You do not need to engage in deep Buddhist practice to develop an enlightened mind. Anyone can develop it, and everyone can see the results. It is a universal path towards happiness.

This does not mean misfortune cannot come to you. Even those with the enlightened mind may experience it. However, the enlightened mind will not be hindered, and instead think: “By experiencing this problem, may I alleviate the suffering of others.”

In this way, all obstacles become boons. Every setback is a teacher that instructs you to think of others. The suffering you may feel is nothing compared to what someone else in your same situation would experience, so you must aim for others to also have the same strong resolve.

“[The] self-cherishing thought is the single greatest enemy to your own success, your own happiness, and that of all other beings. As long as self-cherishing dwells in your heart, there is no space to generate [an enlightened mind].” (p.51)

The stronger your self-centered nature is, the more amplified all sources of suffering will be. Anger, jealousy, pride, desire, and dissatisfaction all become more powerful; and inversely, they all diminish the closer you get to the enlightened mind.

The selfish mind wants to be the best, and be associated with the best. It wishes for others to be below it, to have less happiness. When it undoubtedly clashes with the nature of human reality, which is imperfect, lacking, and subject to constant change, it will in fact experience every possible negative thought. The outcome is always suffering, and it will be suffering that can only produce more suffering in the future.

“The less you practice exchanging yourself for others, and the stronger your selfish mind becomes, the more disturbing you will find people and situations. The more you cherish yourself and are connected about only your own happiness and your own problems—“I have this problem, I have that problem. When will I be happy?”—the more you will be experiencing misfortune and disturbing thoughts, and the more you will label these as problems.” (p.52)

The instant awareness of when a problem arises must be accompanied by the understanding that it can only be the self-cherishing mind that can label the action as either a problem or happiness. Without this recognition, the self-cherishing mind will look outside itself for the solution, or to pass blame, but all external sources can only harm yourself as they are all empty.

The only true blame that prevents future happiness is the self-cherishing mind. Once you understand this, then you will be averse to such inward thoughts, and that self-centered mindset will be the target that your mind training eliminates.

“No matter what difficult circumstances arise, put all the blame on the self-cherishing thought. Recollect how every difficulty is due to the shortcoming of self-cherishing... give back to the self-cherishing thought all the problems and undesirable things that the self-cherishing thought has given you. The self-cherishing mind wants you to look elsewhere for the source of your problems, but with this practice you lay the blame squarely on the root cause: self-cherishing itself.” (p.52)

In this way, you have experienced the gradual progression towards happiness. You know it is the mind that labels a problem as such, that enables it. You know the inner strength required to avert your attention from yourself and towards others to seek turning big problems into manageable small ones. Now you can understand that when you correctly attribute the self-cherishing mind to all your problems (past, present, and future), then every problem does become the opportunity to

practice happiness. Each problem allows you to distance yourself from the self-centeredness. Every obstacle becomes a weapon to dispel this attitude and create universal compassion.

“Whatever difficulties arise, put all blame on your self-cherishing thoughts... and then destroy the self-cherishing by turning the problem back on it. Whatever energy you would have used to eliminate an external problem can now be used to eliminate your self-cherishing instead... This is the deep, essential psychology that really wipes out the self-cherishing thought, the source of all your problems, and makes it nonexistent... This single practice of exchanging yourself with others stops all the confusion and every problem in your life.” (p.53)

A particularly effective practice you can begin to realize this aim is known as giving-and-taking or Tong-Len.

“Visualize taking all the suffering of other beings into your own heart, and then imagine giving everything—your own body, possessions, happiness, and merit—to others... Imagine that whatever problem you are experiencing is due to willingly taking upon yourself the problems of others, thereby relieving them of all suffering.” (p.54)

“While practicing taking and giving, I have been praying to receive upon myself all the undesirable experiences of other beings. Now my prayer has been answered. I am receiving all the undesirable experiences of others and experiencing them on their behalf.” (p.57)

THE HEART ADVICE

“Unless you change the way you use your mind, there will always be an enemy to harm you, there will always be unfortunate circumstances to befall you. But if all the people in the world truly possessed [an awakened mind], we would have no need for guns, bombs, armies, and police. Lama Yeshe, my own precious teacher, used to say: “An apple a day keeps the doctor away; a good heart a day keeps the enemy away.”” (p.60)

“In these difficult and dangerous times, there is no better armor, no better protection, than the practice of thought transformation. By doing these practices and not allowing yourself to be irritated by problems, you are suddenly released from all your problems, like an army dropping its weapons.” (p.62)

“The wise person, seeing that all happiness and suffering depend upon the mind, seeks happiness from the mind, not from anything external. The mind possesses all the causes of happiness, just as it possesses all the causes of suffering.” (p.63)

“No matter what harm someone does to you with their body, speech, or mind—intentionally or unintentionally—by using thought transformation, you see what they are doing as only beneficial for developing your mind, and this makes you happy. You can see very clearly that this happiness comes from your own mind; it does not depend on how others behave toward you or what they think of you.” (p.64)

“You may have heard nothing new in this teaching. However, if you put this advice into practice, you will see definite and immediate benefits. If you do not try to practice this advice, even though you may have library of Dharma teachings in your mind, your problems will continue and will continue to cause you suffering.” (p.64)