

A Practice that Thrives in Difficulty - Buddhist Thought Training

Preface

There are times when I'm overwhelmed by the news of this world, or by an upsurge of my own negative emotions. Everything stops, and goes into reverse, with all my plans, and whatever optimism I may have had. I realize then how I'm like most people, just doing the best I can to get by. Then I remember - there is a method I have heard about, and have used effectively over the years that changes the difficult passage into something useful. Sometimes this method is the only thing that works to restore my balance.

The phrase "Turning difficult circumstances into the path" comes from the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition, but it is actually a universal practice. It's about being skillful, and using wisdom and compassion to compliment each other. We all know, for example, how some challenge can edify, *and be a catalyst*, and that some painful event can strengthen our intention to change things, in ourselves and in those around us. This is what I wrote about in a poem a few years ago, saying that, at it's best, *'grief has torque – and it saves lives, eventually...'*

Most of the essays and poetry in this collection on thought training all appear in other collections, but I have long thought it would be useful to myself and others to gather these writings together. I have been thinking lately that compassion is a kind of fruit that arises due to a whole range of causes. When someone is closed off, or unresponsive to those around him, or even destructive in their actions, they are not to be blamed, instead we have to work to bring together the causes that have been lacking.

With this in mind, in the first part of this collection, I've chosen a number of essays that lay the foundation for turning all the conditions we meet to our advantage, individually, and for us as a group.

In the second section, called here The Heart of the Matter, I try to delineate the particular emphasis of the Thought Training teachings – using everything we meet to empower our practice and take us further along the path of healing both ourselves and society.

There follows a short section is on what is called “Tonglen” or “Taking and Sending”, as these are traditionally thought of as the quintessential expression of thought training.

I conclude with a section titled ‘Lineage’, on the nature and activity of an awakened person.

*I won't refuse sadness
I know this can become something we need
When held close,
guarded,
fed with reason for hope,
a pearl may emerge
this worth
out of not-abandoned grief*

*And I will stay with you
loyal no end
My joy grows from this
and seeing too the knowledge of what can be...*

*May we all be empowered by whatever difficulties we may meet
to awaken more compassion and wisdom in our lives,
and in all the world*

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About the Author

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A deeper response

When you put together love with a particular kind of wisdom, the result is what I would call a deeper response to living in this world, with all its problems. A loving attitude and positive intentions by themselves are not enough; and even the passionate commitment to social justice, by itself, is also not enough.

So what do I mean here by wisdom? I mean a vision of what a human being can be when they are free from confusion, and have developed their innate capacities for health and happiness, learning, and joy. This is crucial. It's the foundation that's often missing in political activism.

It is exactly this vision that brings the desire to go with our whole lives in the direction of helping others to achieve this aim, on personal and collective levels. Problems move towards solutions when enough people get enlightened in this way.

You can set this kind of vision in any language you want, but without it we are not responding, but reacting from a superficial level, of anger, or fear. Even right motivations that don't address the deep causes in us of our collective greed, depression, and anger don't go far enough. We waste precious time and energy, caught in emotional reactivity, when what is needed is for the struggles and tragedies we encounter to rouse a deeper response from us.

Living in the city, we're going to see and hear about all sorts of tragic events. The question then is, What will we do with them?, How will we respond? and What choices do we have?

Take one event, such as a school shooting, or a bombing, or seeing homeless people, or addicts, or hearing more evidence of political corruption – any one of these can trigger a wide range of responses. We

can be overwhelmed, and get depressed; we can move to numb out and ignore it (which is what most people do - it seems to them to be the best way to survive).

We can also set ourselves to change the injustice, and right here there is another fork in the road. There are more and less effective methods to deal with the personal and collective problems we face. The less effective methods come from a genuine, heartfelt reaction that something should be done, but where this approach fails again and again is that there hasn't been enough thought given to changing the causes in a way that could bring greater relief. There is some benefit to protesting, no doubt, but I don't see it going as far as it could go.

The other alternative is to respond in whatever way is necessary to bring more lasting change {and I do mean in whatever way – retreat, silence, activism, protest, organizing, writing, prayer – any and all of these}.

If what all the world's main spiritual traditions teach is true, then essentially, when we're deluded, we're not who we think we are, and the world and other people are not who we think they are either, and that ignorance leads to self denigration, to the exploitation of others, and the desecration of this beautiful earth.

Starting from the wisdom that understands the preciousness of all life – not as a theory but as a lived experience, what we do and how we live and respond all follows from that. So wisdom is the starting place, and it's what we need to keep a living sense of, whatever we do.

No objective problem

There's a part of the Seven Point Mind Training teachings that says:

'There are three objects,
three poisons,

and three roots of virtue'

'The three objects' are: what has the potential to cause greed, anger, or ignorance to arise;

'the three poisons' are when these mental states have arisen in a person;

and 'the three roots of virtue' are: the response instead of non-attachment, kindness and compassion, and of wisdom.

This teaching is saying that there is no problem that is external to us, in that the way we experience something depends on how we meet it. I find this very liberating to think about. We have a choice in how we're going to respond.

If we have a vision of what a human being is, and what we are capable of, then what would otherwise cause despair can instead bring the deep response of compassion, and that's where living fully in the world becomes empowering. We can let the suffering we meet and hear of bring out our deepest wisdom, love and skill. It can wake us up and strengthen our motivation to do whatever we need to do to help others more effectively.

Lama Yeshe said, 'Integrate all areas of living into a meaningful whole.'

Make no mistake, we all need to take care of ourselves, and to be well nourished spiritually. We also need to do this without becoming lost in it. Then, as mature, responsible human beings, we all know that we should be aware of what's needed in our communities and in our larger family, so we can act on it, and we have to do this too without getting lost in it .

I have such faith that we can solve our problems together and make this a just world because I've known this freedom, and how the heart and mind can open to beauty. I know that with love and insight and with lasting dedication, all our actions become meaningful, whichever way we turn.

They can all serve a greater purpose, and then it's possible to hold the world and all those we meet with tenderness, patience, and care.