



Taking Happiness and Suffering as the Path

by *Dodrupchen Rinpoche*

*I pay homage to Noble Avalokiteśvara, recalling his qualities:
Always joyful in the happiness of others,
And sorrowful whenever they suffer,
You have fully realized all the qualities of Great Compassion
And abide unconcerned with your own happiness or suffering*

Statement of Intent:

I will explain here a brief instruction on how to use both happiness and suffering as the path to enlightenment. This is indispensable for spiritual practice, a vital method of the Noble Ones, and one of the most precious teachings in the world.

There are two parts:

1. how to use suffering as the path,
2. and how to use happiness as the path.

First, these are explained through relative truth, and then through ultimate truth.

How to Use Suffering as the Path to Enlightenment Through Relative Truth:

Whenever we are harmed by sentient beings or by circumstances, if we make a habit of perceiving only the suffering, then even the smallest problem will cause great mental pain. This is because any mental experience, whether happiness or suffering, is to grow stronger the more we become accustomed to it. As this habitual pattern gradually gains strength, before long nearly everything we perceive becomes a cause for attracting unhappiness, while happiness never finds an opportunity to arise.

If we fail to recognize that this depends entirely on the way the mind develops such habits, and instead place the blame solely on external objects and circumstances, then the flames of suffering, negative karma, aggression, and the like will spread endlessly, like wildfire. This condition is what is known as “all appearances arising as enemies.”

We must arrive at a very precise understanding that the reason sentient beings in this degenerate age experience so much suffering is due to their weak powers of discernment. Therefore, not being harmed by obstacles such as enemies, illness, or harmful influences does not mean that these will never occur again. Rather, it means that they will no longer obstruct our practice on the path.

For this to happen, there are two parts. First, we need to get rid of the attitude of being completely unwilling to face any suffering ourselves. Second, we need to cultivate the attitude of actually feeling joy when suffering arises.

Dropping the Attitude of Being Completely Unwilling to Face Any Suffering:

No matter how much displeasure and aversion we generate by seeing suffering as completely unacceptable, it brings no benefit at all. Therefore, we should again and again cultivate a firm conviction in the serious disadvantages of this attitude. From now on, whatever kind of suffering arises, we should repeatedly and forcefully train ourselves in the resolve, “I will not resist it.” In this way, we train in greatly strengthening our courage and inner resilience.

Let’s look at how useless worry is. If we can do something to solve a problem, then there is no reason to be unhappy about it; if we can’t, then worry or unhappiness won’t help either. Next, consider the enormous burden caused by anxiety. As long as our minds remain calm, even the greatest suffering can feel manageable, almost light, like holding a handful of cotton. But if we are dominated by anxiety, even the smallest problem becomes extremely difficult to cope with, because we carry the extra weight of mental discomfort and unhappiness.

Imagine, for example, trying to get rid of desire and attachment for someone we find attractive, while continuing to focus on their attractiveness. Our effort would be wasted. In the same way, if we concentrate only on the pain of suffering, we’ll never develop the endurance needed to bear it. As taught in the instructions called *Sealing the Doors of the Senses*, don’t cling to mental concepts about your suffering. Instead, allow your mind to remain undisturbed in its natural state, bring it back to itself, rest there, and let it settle on its own.

Cultivating the Attitude of Joy When Suffering Arises:

When we see suffering as a support on the path, we should train ourselves to develop joy when it arises. Yet when suffering actually appears, unless we have a spiritual practice that truly fits our mental capacity, simply believing that we can use suffering to gain benefit will not be enough. Without genuine practice, we remain as far from our goal as the earth is from the sky.

Therefore, use suffering as the foundation for the following practices:

a. Using Suffering to Cultivate Renunciation:

When suffering arises, use it to train your mind in renunciation. Remind yourself: “As long as I wander in saṃsara, lacking freedom and control, this suffering is not unfair or unexpected, it is simply the nature of saṃsara.” At other times, develop deep disenchantment by reflecting: “If even the minor suffering of the higher realms is so difficult to endure, how much greater must the suffering of the lower realms be? Truly, saṃsara is a boundless ocean of suffering.” With this awareness, turn your mind toward liberation.

b. Using Suffering to Train in Taking Refuge:

“Life repeatedly brings fears and difficulties. The only protection that never fails is the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha—the Three Jewels. I will rely on them completely. Whatever happens, I will never turn away from them.” Let this conviction grow strong, and continue to train in taking refuge.

c. Using Suffering to Overcome Arrogance:

As I explained before, as long as we remain in saṃsara, we are not truly independent or fully in control of our lives. Instead, we are deeply conditioned by suffering and circumstances beyond our control. Therefore, we must eliminate arrogance, the enemy that destroys our well-being, and abandon the negative attitude of undermining others.

d. Using Suffering to Purify Harmful Actions:

Remind yourself and realize: “All the suffering I am experiencing now, and even greater suffering, indeed, all the boundless suffering that exists, arises from nothing other than harmful, negative actions.”

Reflect carefully and thoroughly on the following points:

1. karma is certain—cause and effect are infallible;
2. karma multiplies enormously;
3. you will never experience the result of an action you have not committed;
4. whatever actions you have committed will never be wasted or lost.

Then say to yourself: “If I truly wish to avoid further suffering, I must abandon its cause, which is negativity.” With the support of the Four Powers, sincerely acknowledge and purify all the negative actions you have accumulated in the past, and firmly resolve to refrain from committing them again in the future.

e. Using Suffering to Find Joy in Positive Action:

Say to yourself and reflect carefully: “If I truly wish to find happiness, which is the opposite of suffering, then I must make an effort to practice its cause—positive action.” Then, in every way possible, do whatever you can to increase your positive and beneficial actions.

f. Using Suffering to Train in Compassion:

Say to yourself: “Just like me, others are also afflicted by similar suffering, or even much worse.” Train your mind by reflecting: “If only they could be free from all this suffering—how wonderful that would be.” This reflection also helps you to understand how to practice loving-kindness, which focuses on those who lack happiness.

g. Using Suffering to Cherish Others More than Yourself:

Train yourself to think: “The reason I am not free from suffering like this is that from time without beginning I have cared only for myself. From this moment onward, I will cherish others instead, because cherishing others is the source of all happiness and goodness.” It is extremely difficult to use suffering as the path once it has already struck and is directly confronting us. Therefore, it is crucial to become familiar in advance with the specific practices we will rely on when misfortune and difficulties arise. It is especially helpful and truly makes a difference if we use the practice we know best and have already experienced personally.

In this way, suffering and difficulties can become a support for our spiritual practice, but this alone is not enough. We must also develop a sense of genuine joy and enthusiasm, inspired by a deep appreciation of the benefit we have gained from our practice. We then need to reinforce this joy so that it becomes stable and continuous.

Therefore, with each of the practices described above, train yourself to think:

“This suffering has been of tremendous benefit. It will help me attain the many wonderful forms of happiness and bliss experienced in the higher realms and in liberation from samsara—states that are extremely difficult to obtain. From now on as well, I know that whatever suffering I encounter will have the same effect. So no matter how harsh or difficult it may be, suffering will always bring me the greatest joy and benefit—bitter yet sweet, like bread made of sugar mixed with cardamom and pepper.”

Reflect on this repeatedly and thoroughly, and familiarize your mind with the joyful state it produces. Through this kind of reflection, the mind becomes so pervaded with happiness that sensory pain is hardly noticed and loses its power to disturb the mind. This is the point at which illness and hardship can be overcome through endurance. It is worth noting that this also indicates the degree to which difficulties caused by external harm, hostility, or adverse conditions can be endured and overcome.

As we have already seen, reversing the attitude of not wanting to suffer is the very basis for transforming suffering into the spiritual path. As long as anxiety and irritation continue to undermine our confidence and disturb the mind, we will not be able to turn suffering into the path. The more we succeed in transforming suffering into the path, the more all our previous practice is strengthened and reinforced.

This is because our courage and good humor naturally increase when we see for ourselves how suffering helps our spiritual practice and positive qualities blossom. It is said that by training gradually with smaller sufferings, step by step, in manageable stages, we will eventually be able to face greater suffering and difficulties as well. This gradual approach is essential, because it is extremely difficult to have direct experience of something that lies beyond our current level or capacity.

In the breaks between sessions, pray to the Lama and the Three Jewels that you may be able to take suffering onto the path. When your mind has grown a little stronger, then make offerings to the Three Jewels and to negative forces and cultivate the fearless attitude: “Please send me obstacles, so I can work on developing the strength of my practice!” At the same time, always maintain confidence, courage, and inspiration.

When you first begin this training, it is essential to distance yourself from ordinary social activities. Otherwise, when you are caught up in everyday busyness and concerns, you are easily influenced by others—your misguided friends—who may ask questions such as, “How can you endure so much suffering or humiliation?” In addition, constant worry about enemies, relatives, and possessions clouds our awareness and disturbs the mind beyond our control. As a result, we easily lose our direction and gradually slide back into old habits.

On top of this, we are continually carried away by distracting objects and situations. In contrast, in the solitude of a retreat environment, none of these disturbances are present. Awareness becomes clear and vivid, and the mind becomes much more workable. For this reason when Chöd practitioners train in “trampling directly on suffering,” they do not begin by working with suffering caused by human relationships amid constant distraction. Instead, they intentionally train in remote and powerful places—such as cemeteries—engaging with the manifestations of gods and demons. In this way, they confront fear directly, free from the entanglements of ordinary social life

In short, the aim is not only for the mind to remain unaffected by misfortune and suffering, but also to be able to draw happiness and peace of mind from them. This requires a change in attitude: do not regard inner problems such as illness, or outer difficulties such as enemies, harmful forces, or slander, as something unwanted or unpleasant. Instead, train yourself to see them as meaningful and workable.

To accomplish this, we need to stop looking at harmful circumstances as problems and instead train ourselves to see them as beneficial. After all, whether something is pleasant or unpleasant depends entirely on how it is perceived by the mind. For example, someone who continually reflects on the pointlessness of worldly concerns will grow increasingly disenchanted as wealth or social connections increase. On the other hand, someone who regards worldly activity as meaningful and beneficial will actively seek, and wish to increase, their resources, power, and influence.

Through this kind of training:

- peace and gentleness arise in the mind and character;
- openness and flexibility increase;
- relationships become easier;
- courage and confidence grow;
- obstacles to Dharma practice are eliminated;
- negative circumstances are turned into advantages;
- success is achieved and auspicious conditions manifest;
- and the mind remains constantly content, in the happiness of inner peace.

To follow a spiritual path in this degenerate age, we cannot do without armor of this kind. Once we are no longer tormented by the suffering of anxiety and irritation, other kinds of suffering will disappear, like soldiers who have lost their weapons. Even misfortunes such as illness will, in most cases, naturally subside.

The former masters used to say: “If you are not unhappy or uncomfortable about anything, the mind remains undisturbed. When the mind is undisturbed, the subtle wind energy (*lung*) remains balanced, and the other elements of the body are not disturbed either. In this way, the mind continues undisturbed, and the wheel of constant happiness turns.” Also, “horses and donkeys with sores on their backs are easy targets for predatory birds. Similarly, fearful people are easy targets for negative forces, but those with stable and strong character are not.”

Thus the wise recognize that both happiness and suffering arise from the mind and therefore seek their happiness and well-being within the mind itself. Knowing that all the causes of happiness are entirely internal, they no longer depend on external conditions. As a result, nothing whatsoever—whether other beings or external circumstances—can truly harm them. Even at the time of death, this attitude remains, so they are always free and self-possessed.

This is precisely how bodhisattvas attain the meditative stabilization (*samādhi*) known as “overwhelming all phenomena with bliss.” Foolish beings, however, pursue external objects and circumstances in the hope of finding happiness. Yet whatever happiness they gain, whether great or small, always turns out as the saying goes: “They are not in control—it’s all in others’ hands, like having one’s hair caught in a tree.” What they hope for never comes to pass; conditions fail to come together; or they make mistaken judgments, and there is one failure after another. Enemies and thieves can easily harm them, and even a small unjust accusation can easily take away their happiness.

No matter how much a crow cares for a baby cuckoo, it can never make it a crow. In the same way, if your efforts are misguided and based on unreliable foundations, they bring only fatigue to the gods, irritation to the spirits, and suffering to yourself. This “heart advice” gathers a hundred essential instructions into one crucial point.

There are many other concise instructions on accepting suffering and hardships to practice the path, and on transforming illness or destructive forces into part of the path, as taught, for example, in the “Pacifying” tradition. Here, in an accessible way, I provide a general outline of how to accept suffering, based on the writings of the Noble Śāntideva and his wise and learned followers.

How to Use Suffering as the Path to Enlightenment Through Ultimate Truth:

Through reasoned analysis, such as the refutation of the arising of phenomena from any of the four extremes, the mind is led toward emptiness—the natural condition of phenomena, a supreme state of peace—and rests there. In this state, not only do harmful circumstances or suffering fail to arise, but even their very names cannot be found. Even after emerging from this state, it is no longer as before, when suffering arose in the mind and was met with fear and uncertainty. Now it can be overcome by recognizing it as unreal—nothing but a conceptual label. I have not gone into detail here.

How to Use Happiness as the Path to Enlightenment Through Relative Truth:

Whenever happiness and the various conditions that give rise to it appear, if we fall under their influence, then arrogance, complacency, and laziness naturally increase, creating obstacles on the path. Indeed, it is difficult not to be carried away by happiness. As Padampa Sangye said: “Human beings can bear much suffering, but only a little happiness.”

That's why we need to think carefully, in whatever ways we can, about the fact that happiness and the cause of happiness are impermanent and inherently unsatisfactory. Do your best to cultivate a deep sense of disillusionment and prevent your mind from falling into its usual laziness. Say to yourself: "Look: all worldly happiness and material wealth are fleeting and insignificant, and bring with them many problems and difficulties. Still, in a certain sense, they do have their usefulness. The Buddha said that someone overwhelmed by suffering will find it very difficult to attain enlightenment, while for someone who experiences happiness, the path is easier."

"What good fortune, then, to be able to practice the Dharma in a state of happiness like this! From now on, in whatever way I can, I must transform this happiness into Dharma, and from the Dharma, happiness and well-being will continuously arise. In this way, I can train in making Dharma and happiness support one another. Otherwise, I will always end up where I started—like trying to boil water in a wooden pot." The essential point here is that whatever happiness or well-being comes our way must be united with Dharma practice. This is the whole vision behind Nāgārjuna's *Precious Garland*.

Even though we may be happy, if we do not recognize it, we will never be able to make use of that happiness as an opportunity to practice the Dharma. Instead, we will forever hope that some additional happiness will come our way, and we will waste our lives on countless projects and activities. The antidote to this is to apply the Dharma whenever it is appropriate and, above all, to savor the nectar of contentment.

There are other ways of turning happiness into the path, especially those based on recalling the kindness of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, and on the instructions on training in bodhicitta, but this is enough for now. Just as with using suffering as the path, so too with happiness, you should go to a solitary retreat place and combine this with practices of purification and the accumulation of merit and wisdom.

How to Use Happiness as the Path to Enlightenment Through Ultimate Truth:

This is the same as turning suffering into the path.

What This Training Brings:

If we are unable to practice when we are suffering because we are overwhelmed by anxiety, and we are unable to practice when we are happy because of our attachment to that happiness, then there is no opportunity left to practice the Dharma at all. Therefore, nothing is more crucial for a practitioner than this training in transforming both happiness and suffering into the path.

If you have this training, then no matter where you live—whether in solitude or in the middle of a city; no matter what the people around you are like—good or bad; whether you are rich or poor, happy or distressed; whatever you hear—praise or blame, kind words or harsh ones; you will never feel even the slightest fear that these circumstances could unsettle or overpower you. It is no wonder such a practitioner is called a "Lion-Like Yogi."

Whatever you do, your mind will remain happy, peaceful, spacious, and relaxed. Your entire attitude will be pure, and everything will unfold excellently. Even if your body dwells in this impure world, your mind will experience the splendor of unimaginable bliss, like the bodhisattvas in their pure realms.

As Kadampa masters used to say: “Keep your happiness under control, and put an end to suffering. When you are alone, this training will be your true friend; when you are sick, it will be your nurse.”

Goldsmiths refine gold by heating it in fire to remove impurities, and then cooling it again and again in water until it becomes flexible. The mind can be trained in the same way. When you bring happiness onto the path, attachment to it diminishes; when you bring suffering onto the path, the mind becomes clear and positive. Then you will easily attain the extraordinary level of meditative stability in which mind and body become capable of accomplishing whatever you wish.

This instruction is the most profound of all, for it perfects discipline, the source of all that is positive and wholesome. Not clinging to happiness creates the foundation for the discipline of renunciation, and not fearing suffering makes that discipline completely pure. As it is said: “Generosity is the ground of discipline; patience is what purifies it.” If you train in this practice now, then when you reach the higher stages of the path, you will experience like this: “All phenomena will appear like an illusion. Being reborn is like entering a beautiful garden. In times of gain and in times of loss, there is no fear of afflictive emotions or suffering.”

Here are some examples from the life of the Buddha. Before his enlightenment, he gave up the kingdom and lived by the river Nairāñjanā, undisturbed by the hardships he undertook. After his enlightenment, the leaders of humans and gods, up to the highest realms, showed him supreme reverence, placing their heads at his feet and offering to serve and honor him with all kinds of delights.

However, a brahmin named Bhāradvāja insulted and criticized him a hundred times; he was accused of sexual misconduct with the impudent daughter of another brahmin; he lived on rotten horse fodder for three months in the land of King Agnidatta, and so on. Yet his mind remained completely unshaken, like Mount Meru unmoved by the wind. This shows that, to attain our own ultimate benefit, we must cultivate the equal taste of happiness and suffering.

This kind of teaching is truly taught by the Kadampa masters, whose very lives embodied their saying: “No complaints in suffering, great renunciation in happiness.” But when someone like me attempts to explain it, even my tongue feels awkward and embarrassed. Still, with the intention of cultivating within myself the equal taste of the eight worldly concerns, I, the old beggar Tenpe Nyima, have written this here in the forest of many birds.