

dealing with depression

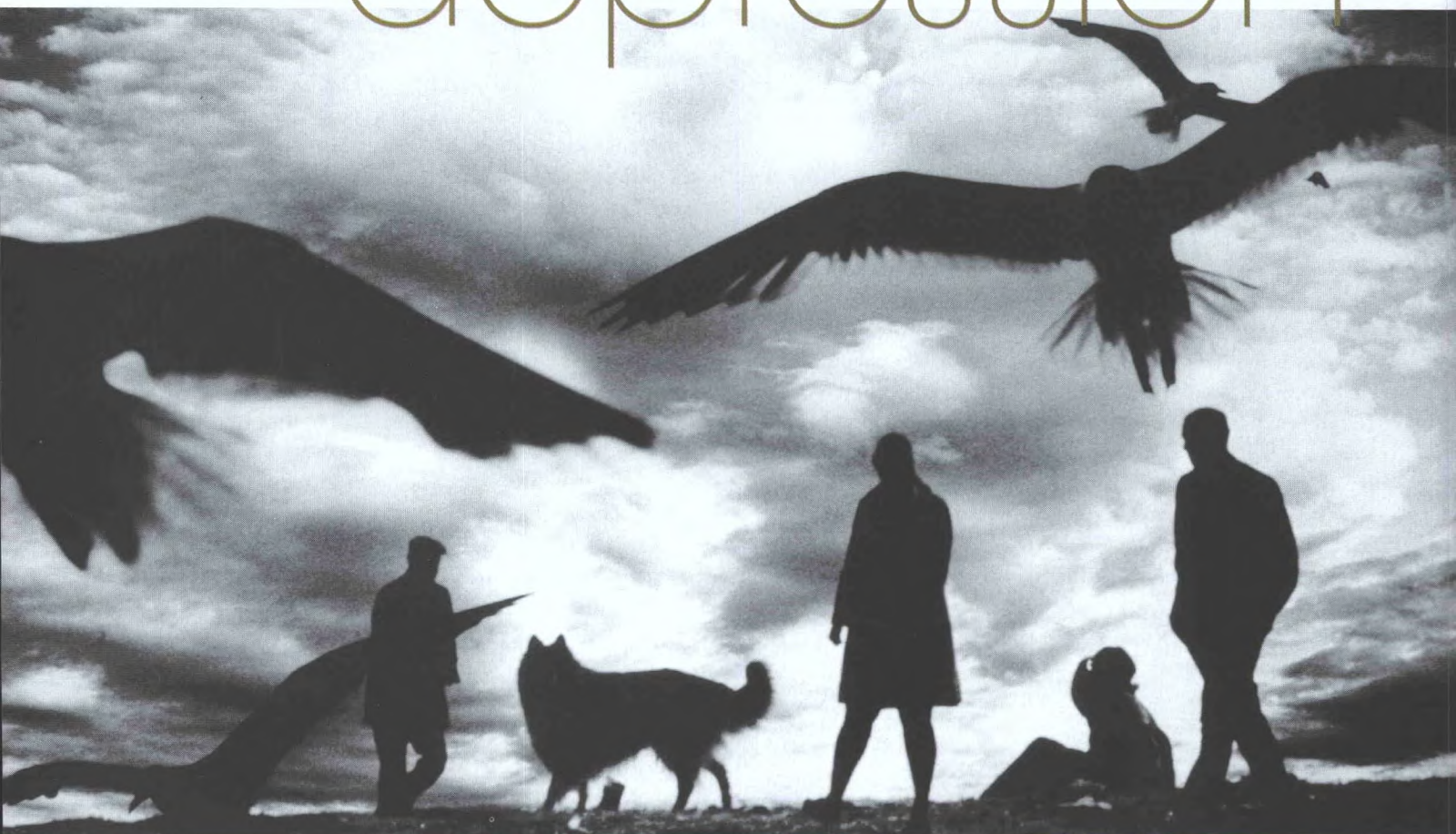


Photo: Jeff Gould

We have all experienced occasional bouts of depression, that mysterious and debilitating condition that is sometimes called the common cold of our mental and emotional life.

But when it manifests, not just as a fleeting sadness, but a pervasive and relentless despair, doctors give the condition many labels: bi-polar for the variety that has wild mood swings, endogenous if it seems to come from nowhere, reactive when it is triggered by specific events, SAD (seasonal affective disorder) when it flares up in the winter and post-natal or baby blues, after childbirth.

In its many forms, it affects more than 20 million Americans. In Australia it has risen from tenth to fourth-most common problem seen by GPs and costs an estimated \$A5 billion annually.

When you are in its grip, you want out – but

paradoxically you don't have the energy to do anything about it. The use of medication is controversial, although it can sometimes help stabilize the underlying physiological imbalance – by freeing up serotonin, for instance – so that sufferers don't have to battle with mental exhaustion and can get on with their daily lives. But what remains is the underlying mental dysfunction that must be faced and dealt with, the monkey mind from which everything we see and hear and experience comes.

In *Ultimate Healing*, Wisdom Publication's first new book by Lama Zopa Rinpoche in ten years, Rinpoche suggests the cure for not only depression, but all forms of illness and disease: unqualified love in the form of compassion for all living beings – including oneself. Written with humility and kindness, *Ultimate Healing* is rich in wisdom and practical help for those in pain.

During a retreat I did in Adelaide, I used to listen to the radio in the afternoon. One afternoon the program was on depression, and the guest was a female psychologist who had written books on the subject. She seemed to have a controversial philosophy, which differed from that of most other psychologists. Her essential advice was that [people] should accept their depression rather than reject it.

It seemed that she had analyzed other methods of dealing with depression and found them unsatisfactory, whereas accepting depression immediately reduced the associated emotional problems of worry and fear, and brought peace. Her advice to accept depression rather than reject it is controversial because it completely opposes our usual way of thinking. Our selfish mind wants to be free from depression, not accept it. The conclusion she reached represents a radical change of concept, but it accords with the philosophy of thought transformation.

This psychologist's advice, however, made no mention of the long-term management of depression. We accept today's depression and this month's depression, but what do we do about all our future depression? Is there a solution that ensures that we never have to experience depression again?

Depression can be the result of a specific situation, in which case you can apply the relevant meditation to deal with those conditions; however, depression and feelings of hopelessness can also arise for no particular reason. When you are experiencing depression, you should prepare yourself each morning by making a strong determination not to allow the situation to upset you. [This] strengthens you and gives you courage. Also make a strong determination to transform your depression into happiness. During the day, when you start to feel depressed or upset, you should immediately remember the determination you made in the morning and not let the situation overwhelm you. No matter how bad the situation seems, and even if it is commonly regarded as a serious problem, you should not allow it to make your life dark and depressed.

After making this determination, you then mentally prepare yourself for the day by thinking of the methods you will use when you start to feel depressed or upset. There are various special techniques for fighting depression.

remember impermanence and death

The first technique is to think of impermanence and death. Remember that your death will definitely happen, but that when it will happen is uncertain. This life is very

talking to the respiratory therapist

By Del Marie Rogers

*He's stood at so many deathbeds,
watched the monitors flutter, stop.*

*Newborn infants, old men with one lung left
like a sail to carry them home.*

He says, let me tell you a story.

*A premature baby, one tiny handful –
with the help of a creaking machine, in Delhi,
I kept her breathing.*

*Inquire about a minor ailment,
if you are so bold, some distracting ache.*

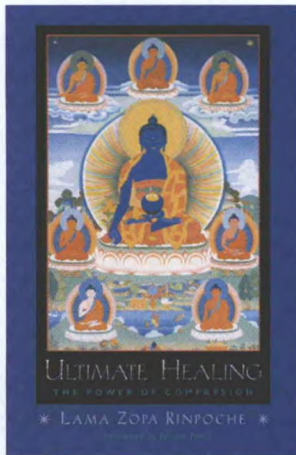
*Listening, intense, he'll grip your wrist,
count the faithful pulses of blood.*

His eyes will grow calm, satisfied.

He'll ask, is your heartbeat normal?

Are your organs working? Can you breathe?

Grateful, you'll answer yes, yes.



Ultimate Healing focuses the reader's heart on a spiritual cure, leading the mind to an understanding of life, death, impermanence and suffering. Part One includes stories of people who have recovered from disease through the practice of meditation, how to accept a life-threatening illness, and how to free other living beings from suffering. Part Two contains various meditations and healing practices, many of them translated or composed by Lama Zopa Rinpoche himself and described by the book's editor, Ailsa Cameron, as "a patient planting of real inner causes for health and happiness." ❁

Published by Wisdom Publications 2001

short; it lasts just for a minute, a second. Rather than thinking that you won't die for a long time, think that you might suddenly die today, even within the next hour – or the next minute.

Think about impermanence and death every day, every hour, every minute. After waking up in the morning, rejoice that you are still alive, that you still have a precious human body, then decide that today is the day you are going to die... This helps to cut your attachment, your grasping and clinging, which bring a lot of expectations. Depression is related to attachment; you become depressed when you don't get what your attachment wants ...Thinking that your life is very short and that it could easily end stops your strong grasping; you then have no worry and fear in your life.

experience your depression on behalf of others

A second technique for dealing with depression, and the best way to make your depression beneficial, is to use it to generate the loving, compassionate thought of bodhichitta. In this way you transform your problem of depression into happiness and use it to bring happiness to all living beings; you use your depression in the path to enlightenment. Numberless living beings are living with depression and numberless others have the karma to experience depression in the future. Think, "I am just one person, while others are numberless. How wonderful it would be if I, one person, could experience the depression of all living beings, as well as all their other suffering,

and allow them to have all happiness and peace, up to enlightenment." If possible, when you say "all their other suffering," think of the suffering of suffering, the suffering of change (which means the temporary samsaric pleasures), and pervasive compounding suffering. This is more profound because you are not just thinking of physical pain or poverty but considering the entire suffering of samsara...

Then do the actual meditation of taking other living beings' suffering – in particular, their depression – upon yourself. By generating compassion for others, take all their depression and causes of depression, as well as all their other suffering, within you. Breathe in through your nostrils all this suffering in the form of black smoke, which then absorbs into your ego, your self-cherishing thought, the real enemy that you have to destroy. Use all this suffering as a weapon to destroy your ego, which gives you all your depression and other problems.

This demon abiding in your heart, your real enemy, is completely destroyed; it becomes nonexistent. After that, if possible, meditate on emptiness. After destroying the ego, which cherishes the "I," meditate on the emptiness of the "I." As the ego is totally destroyed, so also is the false "I" that the ego has been cherishing so strongly as the most important and precious among all beings. As the self-cherishing thought becomes nonexistent, so also does its object, the real "I," which appears to you to exist from its own side. You then meditate on the emptiness, the ultimate nature, of the "I." Concentrate a little while on the state of emptiness. Concentrate on the absence of the inherently existent "I," which exists nowhere, neither on the base nor anywhere else.

This meditation can be very beneficial for depression, but it depends on how effectively you can meditate on emptiness. For some people meditating on emptiness is powerful medicine.

After this, by generating loving-kindness toward others, do the meditation of giving. Give all living beings your body, in the form of a wish-fulfilling gem; all your wealth and possessions; all your merit, or good karma, the cause of all your happiness; and all your happiness, up to enlightenment. Other living beings receive everything they need; all the enjoyment they receive then causes them to actualize the spiritual path, and they all become enlightened.

Relate this practice of taking and giving to your breathing. In the case of depression, concentrate more on the practice of taking upon yourself the suffering of other living beings. The essential meditation is to experience your depression on behalf of all other living beings.

Do the meditation of taking and giving in the morning and evening, and during the rest of the day, while you're driving, eating, and engaged in other activities, immediately apply the antidote whenever the thought of your depression comes into your mind. As soon as you start to feel depressed, immediately think, "I am experiencing this depression on behalf of all other living beings" or "This depression that I'm experiencing is the depression of all other living beings."

Thinking that the depression is not yours but that of all other living beings can be helpful. This also applies to AIDS, cancer, or any other sickness.

When you experience your depression for others, when you change your attitude from thinking "I'm depressed" to "I'm experiencing this depression for others," your depression becomes enjoyable and worthwhile. It is essential to think again and again that you are experiencing your depression for others, because this thought keeps your mind in a constant state of peace and happiness. When you practice this in your daily life, you then enjoy life and see purpose in living. You feel joy at having the opportunity to experience depression, and you see your life as worthwhile because you are living it for others...

When you experience depression, it is good to look at the situation as a retreat. Even though you are not in a physical retreat in the sense of keeping your body in a room, you are in a real retreat through keeping your mind always in bodhichitta. If your depression persuades you to practice bodhichitta, you then experience powerful purification and collect extensive merit all day long. For the weeks, months, or even years that you have the depression, it is as if you are doing a Vajrasattva retreat. This is the best retreat, because every hour, every minute, every second that you put your effort into developing bodhichitta makes your life beneficial for all sentient beings. Using your depression to practice bodhichitta, like tantra, becomes the quick path to enlightenment.

One way to stop the experience of depression and other problems is to do strong practice of purification in your daily life, thus purifying the cause of depression. By purifying the cause of problems, you don't experience the problems; otherwise, you will continue to experience depression from life to life... There are also other powerful practices of purification, such as reciting the names of the Thirty-Five Buddhas, Vajrasattva meditation and recitation, and Dorje Khadro fire puja. Purification practice is essential, because unless the negative karma is purified, you will also experience depression in future lives.

Simply accepting your depression is also helpful. You can think, "I deserve to experience this depression because of the numberless heavy negative actions I have done in the past." You can also think that by experiencing the depression you are exhausting the negative karma you have collected during beginningless rebirths. Thinking in this way can make you happy to experience depression rather than regard it as harmful. When we wash dirty clothes in soapy water, at first a lot of black dirt comes out. We see this as positive, not negative, even though the clothes do not immedi-

ately become clean. It is similar when we practice a spiritual path. Negative karma can manifest, or come out, in the form of depression and sickness. This is not bad, because it is a sign that we are exhausting our negative karma...

When we practice Dharma, negative karma can manifest very quickly and be exhausted through the experience of sickness, depression, and other problems. In this case the soap and water is Dharma practice. This is why many Dharma practitioners encounter sickness and many other obstacles when they do strong practice. Buddhist teachings emphasize the importance of always keeping your mind in a state of happiness. If you are unhappy, you also make your family and the other people around you unhappy. You are so caught up in yourself and your depression that your mind is not open to others. You cannot love or help others or make them happy. You cannot even smile at others; you cannot give others even that small pleasure.

When you are happy, on the other hand, you are relaxed and have space in your mind to think of others, to cherish and love others. You can give pleasure to others by smiling at them. You can also do your work and your spiritual practice better. If your mind is depressed, you even stop your spiritual practice. You feel so discouraged that you cannot recite even one *Om Mani Padme Hum*. Therefore, when your life is miserable, it is very important to keep your mind happy by utilizing your problems in the path to enlightenment.

If, however, you feel a lot of excitement upon achieving some success, again your life becomes unstable. Your mind is distracted, and a mind that is not stable cannot do spiritual practice. You need to practice thought transformation, so that neither feeling miserable nor feeling happy becomes an obstacle to achieving the path to enlightenment.

You need to keep your mind happy and positive, because this will keep your mind healthy, and from that healthy mind comes a healthy body...

give your depression to your ego

The third technique for dealing with depression is to give your depression to the ego. This is similar to taking on the depression of other living beings. First examine the cause of your depression. What made you experience this depression? Your ego, your self-cherishing thought.

There is an immediate connection between depression and strong cherishing of the "I." You

depression



medicine and healing buddhas

Lama Zopa Rinpoche's new book contains extensive explanations of healing practices. *The Healing Buddha: A Practice for the Prevention and Healing of Disease*, which was originally taught by the great Indian master Padmasambhava, is especially useful in these confused and troubled times when threats of chemical and other attacks arouse fear in the hearts of many.

"The motivation for doing this meditation is simple and unconfused – why?" asks Lama Zopa. "When you are sick, it doesn't matter what label the doctor puts on your disease. In terms of your happiness, the most important thing is to find someone who can cure you, especially without side effects. There is no use being caught up with labels. This is why this practice of visualizing the Healing Buddha is simple."

The book also contains a *Medicine Buddha sadhana*. Medicine Buddha is a fully enlightened being whose purpose is both to cure disease and to prevent its onset.

"The healing deity that is best for a particular person is determined by their individual karma and should be checked with a qualified lama," Lama Zopa said in *Ultimate Healing*. "The person should then receive the initiation of, or permission to practice that deity, which also includes an oral transmission of the deity's mantra."

"When we do deity meditation and mantra recitation, the main healing power comes from our motivation of loving kindness, compassion and bodhichitta ... Sometimes people recover by doing meditation practices themselves and sometime by having someone else do the practices for them [although doing it for oneself is more powerful] ... We can do healing meditations for people who cannot do them for themselves; for example children and old people."

The two practices mentioned are available in booklet form for \$US5 plus postage & handling from FPMT Inc. Education Department, 125 B La Posta Road, Taos, NM 87571 USA. Tel: (1) (505) 758 7766 ext 124 Fax: (1) (505) 758 7765 Email: materials@fpmt.org



become depressed basically because the ego doesn't get what it wants or expects.

Another point to consider is that depression can happen because in the past – whether in a past life or earlier in this life – out of self-cherishing you disturbed the mind of your spiritual master and degenerated or broke your commitments. But this still means that your depression happened because of the ego. It is the ego that obliges you to experience depression.

In one of the sutras in the *Kangyur*, the collection of Buddha's teachings, when explaining the benefits of keeping the five lay precepts (abandoning killing, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct, and drinking alcohol) and the shortcomings of not keeping them, Buddha mentions that feeling suddenly depressed for no particular reason is the result of the past negative karma of sexual misconduct. The text refers to sudden depression happening in the evening, but the same applies to suddenly feeling depressed when you wake up in the morning. Even though you have no particular reason to feel depressed, you suddenly feel unhappy. Your mind can be happy and then suddenly change, like clouds obscuring the sun. I guess that it comes from the negative karma of having caused the minds of others to become unhappy. Because of the ego, attachment arose, the negative karma of sexual misconduct was then performed, and as a result, you now experience depression.

It is good to sometimes read *The Wheel of Sharp Weapons*. The essential point to understand is that the turning of the sharp weapon of karma is created by your self-cherishing thought, and that you now need to turn the weapon on the self-cherishing thought, which gave you the depression in the first place. Instead of taking the depression upon yourself, give it back to the ego and totally destroy it.

Use your depression as an atomic bomb to destroy your inner enemy, the self-cherishing thought. When you encounter your enemy in a war, you use whatever weapon you have to crush them. Here you use your depression to crush the ego, your real enemy.

In this way, your depression becomes the best medicine for the chronic disease of your mind, self-cherishing thought, the continuation of which is beginningless and the harm from which is beginningless.

Your depression becomes useful, especially in generating the realization of bodhichitta, and extremely precious, something that you really need. ☸

© Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche 2001. Reprinted from *Ultimate Healing: The Power of Compassion* with permission of Wisdom Publications, 199 Elm St., Somerville, MA 02144, U.S.A., www.wisdompubs.org The book's printing is sponsored in part by Richard Gere and the Gere Foundation.