

# TRANSFORMING PROBLEMS INTO happiness

By Ven. Thubten Gyatso

You may have noticed that things tend to go wrong in life, or, at least, things do not happen exactly as you wish. Despite being repeatedly hurt, we continue fighting with the world, trying to overcome problems and achieve the elusive happiness we have been pursuing ever since we can remember.

But, take a look around. No one has succeeded in eliminating the problems of sickness, ageing, death, having enemies, and so on. There is a method, however, that can remove the word “problem” from our vocabulary.

Instead of being obstacles to happiness, the things that go wrong in our life, which we call problems and react to with sadness, anxiety, and anger, can become a source of happiness. The key to this magical transformation is knowing that it is our subjective experience that determines whether something is a problem or not. If we continue to blame the external world alone for our troubles, things will always appear to us as our enemy, and we will never be free from suffering and anger.

To transform problems into happiness, we must first reject the attitude of not wanting things to go wrong. Things are always going wrong, and it is utterly useless to be unhappy when they do so, because, if the problem can be fixed, we do not need to be sad. And, if the problem cannot be fixed, being sad cannot help, it only rubs salt into the wound. Modern psychology thinks grief is “natural” and therefore good – if we do not grieve there is something wrong with us. Buddha did not equate natural with good. He said that virtue, the true source of happiness, is good, and non-virtue, the true source of sadness, is bad. Virtue comes from wisdom and loving kindness, and non-virtue comes from self-centered ignorance, desire, and anger. It is true that if we suppress grief we may create extra problems, but if there is no grief at all we cannot have the problem of suppression, nor will we have the sadness of grief itself.

Also, we must abandon aversion to problems because fear and anxiety only increase harm by sapping us of our courage. There is a world of difference in the experience of an injection for a child who fears needles compared to a child who has no fear. Anxiety makes even small sufferings intolerable.

Secondly, to transform problems into happiness, we must cultivate the attitude of being happy when problems arise – because they give us the opportunity to cultivate virtue and abandon non-virtue. We do not have to go to the extreme of seeking problems, problems will find us. When they do, we can deal with them in the following ways.

To recover from his addiction, an alcoholic must remove the illusion that intoxication is happiness and see the reality that the addiction only brings misery to himself and others. To free ourselves from the illusion that external objects are the true source of happiness, we should use the inevitable loss of a prized possession, or the death of a loved one, as opportunities to see reality and break our addiction to the world of ephemeral pleasures.

Secondly, to experience suffering is a powerful means for developing compassion towards those who suffer in a similar way. If you want the best treatment, find a doctor who suffers from the same disease as yourself – that doctor will have empathy.

Pride is one of our biggest problems. If we make a boo-boo, laughing at ourselves and pointing out our mistake to others will destroy pride and will prevent us from falling into neurotic concealment of our failings. Instead of ridiculing us, people will like and trust us more.

Finally, as patience is the antidote to anger, our worst enemy, we need problems in order to practice patience. People who harm us are actually our best friends because they are giving us the opportunity to overcome that which hurts us more than anything – our own anger.

In this disturbed age we need the protection of a happy mind. If we are always discontent and anxious, our physiology will be disturbed and physical illness will make us even unhappier. If we are able to ride the bumps of life and even extract happiness from them, our body will be healthy and our mind will be even happier. ☸



Illustration: Ueli Minder



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