

Dharma Teachings by

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Turn Adversity Into Felicity

Many of us have heard from our teachers at least once that one can turn adversity into felicity. In fact that term, "turning adversity into felicity," has become kind of a buzzword. The unfortunate difficulty with buzzwords, with terms that we hear again and again, is that they become difficult to understand. Once we have such a concept that is used again and again, it begins to lose meaning for us. We become the samsaric beings that we naturally are and become more superficial, so when we hear the term "turning adversity into felicity," we think, "Oh, well, maybe I should just grin and bear it," or, "Maybe I should just think positive," or, "Maybe I should simply smile through adversity." We're thinking that's the way it is. But in fact, the teaching on turning adversity into felicity is quite profound.

Turning adversity into felicity: actually, if we understand that, we understand that it is not at all separate from the practice of Guru Yoga, which is a central teaching that is given here at the Temple. It's something that we rely on a great deal as being a very potent, very profound, very deep and very workable practice for us here as busy Westerners.

When we practice Guru Yoga, we actually begin to develop the view that the lama is the source of liberation. We begin to understand using images that are traditional, images that are prescribed to us. For instance, we are taught that we should think of samsara as being like a burning room, that in samsara there is actually a great deal of suffering, and it's actually just as probable that you will experience adversity as it is probable that you will experience felicity. It is just as probable that you will experience suffering as it is that you will experience happiness and joy.

So we think of samsara as being untrustworthy, and we think that within samsara, because of our confusion and our lack of awareness about what our nature actually is, we are constantly giving rise to the causes for more suffering. This is constantly the case. So we think of samsara as being like a burning room with no windows, that there is no escape except for this one door. In our practice we think that the lama is like that door.

The Lama is considered to be the door to liberation, the very means by which the blessing comes to us. Without the lama we would not have been hooked onto the path.

Without the lama we would not receive the teaching. Without the lama we would not understand the teaching. Without the lama our minds would not be empowered and ripened and matured. That is the responsibility of the relationship between the guru and disciple. The mind must be matured in order to progress on the path. So we rely on the lama for all of these things without which we remain wandering in samsara experiencing birth, death, birth, death, birth, death with very little control.

Of course, when life is going well we think that that must not be true. It looks like we have a lot of control in our life. But if you think that, then you should read the newspaper more frequently, and you should talk to people who have been inflicted with incurable, incredible diseases, who were afflicted completely out of the blue, not expecting that their lives would come to this. You should talk to people who have suffered through circumstances that seemed to come from outside, misfortune of one kind or another: the loss of a job, the loss of loved ones. These are terrible sufferings for us as human beings, and until we have experienced our fair share of them--and we will, eventually--old age, sickness and death, these things occur to all of us. We have the delusion of having a certain amount of control in our life. Ordinarily that kind of delusion comes with youth, and then later on, as we pass the age of supreme omniscience, which hits about 30, then at that age we begin to discover that in fact we are not totally in control, that life seems to control us.

So we think of samsara as being this untrustworthy, inescapable difficulty, and we think of the lama as being the door to liberation. We hold that kind of regard. It isn't that we worship a personality. Of course it's not like that. That would be very superficial and useless. What good is a personality? If we conceive of the lama as a personality, what good would that do us? **We** are a personality, and look where it's gotten us. That's nothing to rely on. So we rely on the guru as the condensed essence of all the objects of refuge, all the Buddhas, bodhisattvas, lamas, meditational deities, dakinis and Dharma protectors all rolled into one, including all of the teachings. These are the liberating truths of Dharma. These are the objects of refuge. So the lama becomes the door through which we exit samsara.

Now if you were locked in a burning room and there were no windows, only that door, do you think that you would not really have enough time to go through the door? Do you think that you would stop and think about whether the door is suitable for you or not? Do you think that you would stop and critique the door? Do you think that you would become forgetful and inattentive about the door? Let me tell you something, if you were in a burning room and that were the only door, you would notice it, and you would have what Buddhists call fervent regard for the door**.** The door would definitely be in your mind. That door would be, shall we say, enthroned upon the lotus in your heart. And of course, if we practice correctly and purify our view and correct our view and make it according to the teachings, then that would be the view of the lama as well. We would think of Guru Rinpoche that way, and we would think of our own Root Guru

as being inseparable from that, just as Guru Rinpoche has taught. So this is the kind of regard that we have.

Through the course of our lives we will experience a great deal of adversity. There is no doubt about that. Children who have lived even 10 years--only that--can tell you that they have experienced some misfortune, that they aren't happy about all the circumstances in their lives, that there are certain things that they want and can't have, certain things that they are frustrated by and cannot overcome. Even for a 10-year-old there is clearly the budding knowledge that samsara does not deliver everything that we thought it was going to deliver. As we get older, we discover that samsara is not satisfying, that it's a mixed bag of tricks, that even under the best conditions, while we would have our fair share of happiness, we will also have our fair share of disappointment and loss. The teachings are that what comes together must separate, what goes up must come down, what is lost must be found, what is found would be lost again, that conditions are always temporary and impermanent, whatever they are. So even if we are experiencing much happiness in our lives, it is very difficult to hold onto that happiness. It is very difficult to remain in a state of permanent bliss. In fact, it is impossible here in samsara.

As practitioners we are trying very hard to actualize the practice of Guru Yoga clearly, the practice of fervent regard toward the guru, the practice of actually utilizing the guru as a tool, as a benefit in one's life. One thing that we should be perfectly clear about when we are trying to practice in this way, is which religion we're actually practicing because the tendency is that we as Westerners would repeat the patterns and ideas that we have seen before, in the religions that have been in our culture far longer than Buddhism has been. Generally the pattern that we have been taught is that you have faith, and that declaration of faith is simply enough--that you kind of embrace this idea of faith. There's an element of magic to it, in a sense. It seems as though faith itself will simply carry us through.

Well, in Buddhism we don't feel like that, although faith is certainly an element, and it certainly has the capacity to carry us. Buddhism is uniquely a religion of cause-and-effect relationships. When we go into life, when we go into life situations, we do so with our brains intact and our eyes open. We clearly are aware that without creating the causes for happiness there will not be the condition of happiness -- that you cannot create an apple tree through a grape seed. It simply doesn't happen.

Cause and result seemingly arise one after the other, but in fact we are taught in Buddhist teaching that they arise at the same time, interdependently. We are a religion of realizing that we must create auspicious causes in order to receive appropriate results. So while we want to adapt the idea of faith, we wouldn't want to engage in a practice that would be what I call idiot faith. We would not engage in a practice that, quite frankly, makes us look a bit like a bliss-ninny. We would not engage in a practice that was mindless and not thought through.

Faith is definitely a component, but the way that it is used when we are practicing transforming adversity into felicity, the practice of Guru Yoga, is like this: all conditions have within them a mixture. Even the best conditions, the most wonderful conditions, because they arise in samsara and are samsaric in nature, have within them the seed or inherent causes by which equal amounts of unhappiness as well as happiness will arise.

So when unhappiness comes to us, we absolutely should engage in the antidote. We would do this primarily through establishing faith and confidence in the guru, but it doesn't stop there. It isn't simply holding the idea of faith and confidence in the guru. At that point, with faith and confidence in the guru, we actually have to not simply rely on the idea of the guru, of the idea of Guru Rinpoche, but we have to then rely on Guru Rinpoche's teachings. That's how you have faith and confidence in the teacher. You don't just say it and proclaim it and go back into some deluded "oh, don't worry everything's going to be fine" kind of idea. You would, with faith and confidence in the guru, begin to use what the guru has taught.

The guru teaches us first of all that in order to create the result of happiness and freedom, we must create the causes of happiness and freedom. The causes of happiness and freedom are given to us in our Dharma practice. They're not a secret. You can learn them; you can begin today, this very moment, to engage in creating the causes that will create your future happiness.

Ours is not a religion that believes you can get through a room full of obstacles--which life really is--basically without turning on the lights and seeing where the things are that you might trip over. Our religion is one where we turn on the light, look with our eyes, and do not absent ourselves from the responsibility of clear thought, cause-and-effect relationships, reality, engaging in those practices that will clear the obstacles.

In our lives, perhaps, we might suffer from, let's say, the loss of fortune. Let's say that we have a certain situation where we were very wealthy, we had everything that we needed, and suddenly BAM, misfortune hits. It happens, doesn't it? It happens a lot. Misfortune hits and suddenly we are no longer wealthy. Perhaps it isn't about money. Perhaps it's about relationships. For the women, the prince may ride up on the white horse and everything looks like it's going to be happily-ever-after -- you know the dream. For men, the Queen of Sheba has landed in our lap somehow, and here she is in all her blazing glory. So maybe that kind of thing has happened. But eventually we will find that that cloud definitely has another side to it. It has a silver lining, yes, but it has a little rain in it as well. For many of us, we would experience some loss. Perhaps we might think that we have everything we need, and then simply it is lost. That might occur with our health. We don't plan to die, we don't plan to get sick, but suddenly we find that our health slips and we can no longer rely on our it. For still others of us that

survive all these other things without too many disasters, eventually we will get old and we will die. So there are these situations that must be dealt with.

Now when we deal with them, should we just paste some sort of unthinking, syrupy, positive statement on top of it and therefore make it acceptable? Should we say, "Ah, well, you know I've lost the great love of my life, but hey, it's not so bad. What's the big deal? I can do this!" Or, "Once I was rich and now I'm poor, but hey, I'm a positive thinker and wealth will come to me soon, I'm sure." Do we think like that? I don't think so.

Actually, we are taught by our teachers to engage in creating the causes by which our suffering might end. Clearly if you do not have enough wealth in your life, the causes by which that might come to you have not been created, or they haven t been created in sufficient amounts. So we turn to the guru, but not with an empty prayer like, "Gee, hope you'll land a few thousand in my box. Just stick it in the mailbox. I'll pick it up tomorrow." You don't pray like that. You don't pray to win the lottery. That isn't how it goes. In our religion, the difference is that we actually pray for guidance, we use the teachings that the teacher gives us and we begin to create the causes by which we can overcome the obstacles in our lives.

The result of poverty and not having enough is due to the fact that, according to the Buddha's teachings, in the past, perhaps not even in this lifetime, we have not been particularly generous or forthcoming in our support for others, in our caring for others. So we might look at our lives now with a sense of honesty. Is that the case now? Perhaps it is also the case now, and we just haven't thought of it that way. Or perhaps if we really look in our heart of hearts we might discover that there is a certain dark corner in there somewhere that has a strong element of selfishness and lack of giving. We might see it sneak out every now and then. Maybe not all the time, but it's in there. Or we might discover that perhaps in the past we have been less than generous. So in order to create the causes of having plenty, of having enough, of opening the doors to that kind of prosperity and liberating the conditions under which support and wealth would come to us, we would transform our minds through practice into that which is supremely generous.

If we have only $5 to our name, a good idea is to give maybe 50¢ of that, maybe a dollar of that, to somebody who doesn't have 50¢ or a dollar. If you have nothing, I'm sure you can get it together enough to place a simple candle on the altar and make prayers--that this is like the light that would be offered by this merit to all sentient beings so that they may see their way through the darkness. A small offering like that and prayers to benefit sentient beings begins the process of creating the causes by which our suffering of lack begins to change, and our minds begin to transform into minds which are filled with kindness. We begin to create the habit of caring for others, of kindness.

On the other hand, if we have experienced great disappointment in love, let's say, the first thing that we think is now I've lost my boyfriend or girlfriend or whatever, so I have to do everything I can to get them back. Grasp, grasp, grasp! And when that doesn't work--it doesn't, you know--then what you do is you make prayers to the guru that the lotto will come for us on the romantic level. We even think stupid thoughts like, "Please deliver him or her to me now! Along with the check, put him in the mailbox. I'll pick him up tomorrow." That's the kind of thinking that we have. It's magical thinking, but that's a different religion. That's not our religion.

In our religion, if that happened, we would look for the causes. What are the causes of such a loss? Perhaps I have not been kind and loving. I'll tell you how it is - if no love is given, no love will be received. It's like that. If we do not invest in generosity and caring and loving concern and regard for others in an unselfish way, there will not be a great deal of love forthcoming freely into our lives, because we have not created the causes. We have not held up our part of the bargain. So we begin to create the causes, a real concern, a real interest in the welfare and well being of others. Not just the one you want back. That's easy. Others, all others, kindness and love and generosity coming forth from our hearts. That's the investment that's needed here, that we ourselves would be responsible for not abandoning and leaving without comfort loved ones and friends, not just the one we want, but all our loved ones and friends. And then take it further than that. Not only our friends and loved ones, but also our not-so-friendly friends, maybe the people we don't have much concern for, maybe even our enemies. A loving concern for them is what's required here.

While we live, while we are engaged in Dharma practice, this is not the time to put on blindfolds and pretend that there are no causes and effects. In Dharma you are taught by the lama that the ball is in your court, that you must create the conditions by which your suffering will end, that literally no one else can do that for you, that even if the lama were to stay by your side and walk with you, hold your hand, spoon feed you, constantly hold her arms around you and make sure you're warm and walk you across the intersection so you don't get hit by a bus or whatever, even if that were possible, still it would not be possible for your suffering to be terminated by such a ridiculous relationship. That isn't how it works. The lama teaches us that the ball is in our court, that we and only we can create the causes and circumstances necessary for happiness.

Method is necessary here. Intelligence is necessary here. Clearsightedness is necessary here. Honesty is necessary here. What is not necessary here is idiot thinking, magical thinking, Peter Pan thinking, stupid thinking. That's what's not needed.

Of course the first thing we do when our magical thinking doesn't work out is, we blame the lama. Isn't that great? It's wonderful to have a religion because you can always blame somebody, but actually in Buddhism you can't get away with that one either, because if you do that, then you give your power away. Then what have you got

left? If the fault is outside of you, then the cure is outside of you, and you're in tough shape.

So in our faith and our religion we take responsibility. We try to understand that cause and effect arise together. How to create the perfect causes by which to bring about happiness? Well, slowly, a bit at a time, as we learn. It's a growing thing, and the first thing we have to have is confidence and the second thing is patience, and I'm not even sure if they're separable. They have to come together. Confidence and patience. It takes time to create causes. It takes time and it takes growth, and like anything that begins as a little seedling and ends up as a beautiful, blossoming tree, it's not only the ultimate result of the blossoming tree that is a joy, but every step of the way along the way is also a joy. It's a becoming and growing experience, the happiness of watching one's mind change from that which was tightly constricted, self-absorbed and contracted into that which is spacious, lifted, calm, receptive, generous, and has a strong degree of clarity. Watching oneself grow in that way, haven't you ever noticed that there are so many things that bring us joy?

As I said, we can have love, we can have money, we can have good food, we can have a great car, there are so many things that make us happy for a little while, but my experience has been--and maybe this is the same for you as well--that nothing makes me feel more joy and more happiness than watching my own practice mature, watching my mind transform into something it wasn't before, watching the mind grow into something which is relaxed, which has a kind of sophistication to it, a sophistication that's based not on closing the eyes, but engaging in a purposeful way, to watch myself develop new habits, to watch myself grow through things that I could not grow through before and suddenly I have mastered. These are the real joys in my life. These are the things that sustain me, and if you think about it, you'll probably notice that every time you've gone through a period of spiritual development and growth you find that you have become much more satisfied with yourself than anything else could have made you. You become happier. Oh, maybe not the jump-up-and-down kind of happy we get when we get that new car, but a quiet, supportive, dignified, noble kind of happiness.

And what else brings us the motivation to practice that way, brings us the necessary component we unfortunately need, that old kick in the butt, other than adversity? It's adversity that ultimately comes to be the greatest blessing in our lives. Not that you want it. You don't go, "Hey! Bring on the adversity! Bring it on!" Of course, we're not going to think like that. Nobody wants adversity, but the trick here and the point of this teaching is that we can transform adversity into extraordinary benefit through utilizing the gifts that were given to us by the guru, through using all the objects of refuge as our ultimate support and our true refuge, through not relying on the unpredictable, temporary, mixed events of samsara and grasping at them as though they were our objects of refuge, but instead relying on the guru as the supreme object of refuge, engaging in the guru's teachings, following the guru's example, using that

method that was given. If we do that and transform adversity into great benefit, that benefit is extraordinary. It has a depth to it that it can't be gotten any other way.

If you were poor and it were possible to wish upon a star and suddenly a million dollar check appeared in our hand, the superficiality of that kind of happiness would be evident from that point on through the rest of your life because all you have there is a million dollars, and a million dollars in a mind that is completely dissatisfied, untrained, unhappy, not relaxed, does not make for happiness. And the first people who will tell you that, are people with a million dollars who are not happy. But if, on the other hand, you experience impoverishment and begin to create through your practice in a disciplined, compassionate and honest way the causes for prosperity, the causes for riches of all kinds to enter into your life through the practice of generosity, through the practice of offering, through the practice of the discipline of engaging in Dharma practice, through all of the many means that have been prescribed by the teacher, then not only will the impoverishment cease, but there are layers and layers and dimensions and dimensions of supportive change that intertwine and are part of and are inseparable from that feeling of opulence and wealth, and they all become a part of you. They become a part of your habitual tendencies. You develop new habits. They become part of your awareness, part of your perception, and they become part of the cause and effect relationships that are the karma of your experience of continuum.

These are the blessings that when you die and enter into the bardo, remain with you. It won't be the million dollar check. You can't take that with you. But the practice that you have engaged in, that has created the cause for happiness and prosperity, the habit of that, the merit of that, the virtue of that, the karma of that, these causes, these seeds go with you into the bardo experience and ripen there. They go with you into your next incarnation and ripen there.

Simply repeating phrases, simply blinding yourself to reality, simply warping your own mind and denying what you see, simply skating through life on the surface as though there were no cause and effect relationships, as though you were, basically, a complete idiot, is not receiving the blessing of the guru. This is not transforming adversity into felicity.

To open the eyes, to open the heart with confidence and patience, to accomplish the teachings that were actually given to us with courage, the courage of accepting responsibility, the responsibility of your own life, of your own reality is like holding a precious treasure because once it is in your hand, it is yours. No one can take that away from you. Guru Rinpoche himself, if he were so inclined, could not take away from you the potency of how you can transform your life through practice. No one can take that away from you. It is the one thing that you have now in your hand that you will never be parted from unless you yourself give it up, and even then, although you've denied it, it's still there. In that way you are practicing this teaching that is so often spoken of: turning and transforming adversity into felicity. Having practiced in this way, you come out of

the experience deeper, more relaxed, more spacious, more sophisticated, more developed and happier.

You know in your heart when you have achieved that kind of success, when you have practiced in that way, and you also know when you're bullshitting. My advice to you therefore, is to look within, with honesty and clarity, and practice what you have been taught, and in this way your life will be transformed into a vehicle of blessings. And it will always remain that way. It is the one wealth that you have that you can actually take with you.

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