

Training with and Converting Despair

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I take refuge in the Buddha since he is our True Teacher.

I take refuge in the Dharma since it is the medicine for all suffering.

I take refuge in the Sangha since its members are truly wise and compassionate.

I am going to be talking this evening about training with and converting despair. I felt that, when it came right down to it, I probably ought to be the one to talk about this since all I have to do is talk about my own life (laughter). And I should be eminently qualified, at least I would like to think so.

My whole experience of life as a young person was one of almost continual self-pity and despair. And that was for me part of why I became a Buddhist and why I began meditating and ultimately why, at a pretty early age, I became a monk as well. It was to do something about myself to deal with my own despair about why I felt the way I did, why I was the way I was, and why I experienced so much suffering. And so now it's possible, over the space of some years, to look back at that and see something very pure, something very positive and motivating, and look at that unhappiness with a gentle heart. It was very hard to do that as a young person because despair was so immediate and so powerful. There is a derivative word from 'despair' which is 'desperation', and I had a lot of desperation as a young person.

I looked up this word 'despair' in the dictionary, because every now and then something very useful comes out of that. And sure enough, that was the case here. The main definition was, 'to lose hope' or 'to be without hope'; so I looked at that and thought, 'well that's interesting, that's a good starting point.' We can probably all look at the times in our lives and in training when it seemed like there really wasn't much of any hope. And that can lead to having thoughts like, 'it's no use, I've tried everything and gotten nowhere'; 'I'll never be any good at training. Look at how much better so and so is than me'. We probably all have thoughts like this come up from time to time. And in one sense, it's perfectly human to have thoughts like that run through your head at times, but the more prone you are to look down or look in a despairing way at things, the more frequent and the more powerful such thoughts tend to be. And thus the greater the desperation that we might feel to try to come to grips with the force of such thinking and it's effect on us; we can be really driven by thoughts of that nature. Inadequacy and despair tend to be very closely linked, and thinking that we're lacking, thinking that we're inadequate in some way. Thinking that our meditation or our training or our efforts in life to achieve success, i.e. fulfil our hopes, have come to nothing or fallen short of the mark. And so we've tried and tried and put all this effort in and we've tried to be a success and, in the end, here we are 'boom'! We're really no happier than when we started.

Now I want to go back to this word 'hope' because for me a little red flag goes up whenever I hear that word. And it's a word that we tend to use a lot, innocently, and in a lot of circumstances: 'I hope you're doing well'; 'I hope you have a good

trip'. But there's something more going on here with this word 'hope', and that's part of what I want to explore this evening because the dictionary, as sometimes happens, provided a door into looking at what despair is and how we can convert it, how we can train with it. And so going back to this definition, 'to lose hope' or 'to be without hope' i.e. 'our life is hopeless' (and I guess sometimes people feel so hopeless that they take their own lives. It's presumed--I don't know if it's always true--that people who commit suicide have given up all hope for their lives); as with 'despair', there's a noun and a verb definition of 'hope': the noun definition is 'a feeling that what is wanted, will happen'. So we're starting out making a presumption of having some kind of desire, quite frankly, and we're hoping that what we desire will happen. And then the verb form is simply, 'to want and expect' (laughter). So now I've got probably four or five little red flags, because I'm a Buddhist monk (laughter), and I've been studying over all these years that the cause of suffering is craving (laughter). Wanting and expecting, expectation, desires--we talk about these things all the time—and we know that, sooner or later, they're likely to get in our way. And the tighter we cling to them, the greater the chance that sooner or later our hopes and expectations are going to be the cause of our suffering. And, in fact, one of the classical definitions of suffering in Buddhism is 'not to get what one wants'. And as human beings we naturally want things, we want good things to happen but since we live in the human world, which is a world of change and impermanence, things frequently don't work out the way we want them to. And even with the best of intentions, the purest of intentions, things don't work out the way we would like them to or hope them to or expect them to.

So here we are, thanks to Webster's Dictionary, looking at all these things, which in Buddhism we have identified as being dangerous places, or just places that tend to trip us up and that we need to be careful of. Our more deeply rooted hopes, the ones in which we've invested more expectation, more wanting, those hopes are the ones that, if they go unfulfilled, then we run the risk of having that lack of fulfillment snowball over time. And what do you get? You get despair. We've created a 'habit-energy' of clinging to hopes but, because of the way the universe operates, they remain largely unfulfilled. And when we get to a point where they haven't worked out continuously for some years (laughter) then we're starting to think, 'oh God, I give up. It's no use; I've tried everything and gotten nowhere'. I think everyone, in one way or another, experiences this. We've all had times in our lives where we've invested a lot of hope, a lot of expectation; things haven't worked out and we've arrived at a place where we just despair and we think, 'good gracious, it just hasn't worked. I've tried and I've tried'. And in Buddhism, this isn't necessarily a bad place to be, quite frankly; we may not realize it at the time because it can seem very, very dark. It can seem hopeless but there's another word here, which is 'disillusionment': disillusionment and despair are actually very closely linked words. If we look at the word 'hope' and compare it to 'illusion', those are also two very close words. When we have our hopes come to nothing, then we can begin to see the illusory nature of them, the illusory nature of hope and want and desire. And so then if you tack on the 'dis' to 'illusion'--'disillusion'--it means 'the breaking up of an illusion', or 'the seeing of the emptiness of an illusion'. So in terms of Buddhist teaching and practice, that's actually a very positive thing because we're beginning to see that, 'okay, here are a bunch of ways in which I have invested energy into hope, desire, and expectation; it hasn't worked out, so now I need to try

something different. I need to redirect how I live; I need to make some kind of mid-course flight correction.

So I think disillusion can be a very positive thing. And although despair has a connotation of giving up and looking down, looking down into darkness saying, 'oh God', being negative, it's actually just a hair's breadth or a turning of the head in a different direction away from actually being something quite positive. The word 'disillusion' helps us see that. From a state of despair, all we need to do is turn and look to see that we can do things differently and take on a new direction. So the key in converting despair is, as Zen Master Dogen says, 'the secret of life is will: words are its key'. Years ago, Rev. Master Jiyu used to talk about 'will' and 'despair' in terms of how it affected the body. Specifically, how it affects our kidneys, which seem to be the organ most connected with despair. She made a connection between 'will' or 'willingness', and Buddhist training as being the way to convert to despair. So we are talking about a positive use of the will.

In talking about despair and how one trains with it and converts it, I often think of the book that Rev. Master Jiyu wrote: 'How to Grow a Lotus Blossom'. Because there are several pieces in her book that deal directly with that and I find are very useful, one of which is Plate 2. It's actually the second of the plates or depictions of stages in her religious experience, the kensho that she had. Plate 2 is, *Scaling the Glass Mountain*: "There is nothing for it but to go straight up the face. How do I climb that which is sheer and glassy? By going straight up, by not thinking whether I live or die, by not thinking I am inadequate or adequate; male or female. Maleness and femaleness cannot help me here; here the world of opposites ceases. There is no way up for one who is stuck in inadequacy or in adequacy.

"Up and up and up, without ever doubting my ability, without looking down, without thinking, without caring about the lightning that comes from the storms, without fearing the ferocious animals I may meet...(Don't be thrown by that term, 'ferocious animals'. All you have to do is just look at the ferocious animals in your own mind, (laughter) to know what she's talking about)... 'without worrying about the darkness or the avalanches, holding fast to the memory of the kensho'; (that is, her first kensho). "Up, up and on. Will the climb to the top never end? Perhaps everyone else was right. Perhaps to go off into despair ... but I *know* this is wrong and I will not listen to the voice that whispers, "Go back, you are too weak, you cannot do it. You have not been good enough to climb this mountain; you have not done enough to train yourself--...(we've all heard that voice before, (laughter) at one time or another)... you do not know how to climb." And I say, Quiet! I *can* climb and I *will*".

So there you have it. 'I can climb and I will'. She just decides, 'well there's nothing for it but to go straight up'. I've been in this situation myself, at times, and it seems like there's nothing to hold onto, it seems like you're just having to do something in your life that you don't really know how to do; you really can't see in front of you but you just have to go on. And as long as you think to yourself, 'I can't do this; I don't know how to do this; I don't know how to train' then, of course, that's the reality you've created for yourself in that moment and of course you don't. You can't go anywhere and, as she says, 'there is no way up for one who is stuck in either inadequacy or in adequacy'. If you say to yourself, 'well I don't know how to get up this mountain', or 'I don't know how to deal with this particular situation. I don't

know how I'm going to convert all the despair in my life, but I'm willing to do it, I will do the best I can. I will take one more step', then, lo and behold, you move forward by virtue of the willingness itself.

With this in mind, I wrote down here a couple of revised definitions for the word 'despair' in light of Buddhist meditation and training (laughter). We started out with, 'to lose hope' or 'to be without hope', and we've gone over the ramifications of that. My redefinitions are: 'to think that just training one step at a time is insufficient'; and 'to think that we are not worthy of the love of the Eternal'. Two very simple things that we've all heard and we all say, 'oh yeah, we're just training one step at a time'. Or 'yes, I know that the Eternal is pure love and, yeah, yeah, that's fine'. But if we do allow ourselves at any time, to look down at the darkness and think that the darkness is the reality of our lives, to think that we can't, in reality, do something about ourselves, or we can't, in fact, take one more step--what we are implying is that the one step that is right in front of us is somehow insufficient, it's not enough. We're starting to go back into holding onto some sort of hope that we can do something which will get us there in a big, big hurry or in one big leap or provide some kind of shortcut. Even though we may already know better, it's very easy to start thinking, 'wouldn't it be nice to make this big shortcut or this big leap and not have any more despair, not have any more doubt, not have any more anger?' It just doesn't work that way. For better or for worse, as human beings, the secret of life is will, the secret of life is willingness; the willingness to take one step is what grows and develops our faith. It grows and develops our will by exercising the will. In this respect it is like jogging or running or riding a bike or lifting weights; it's the repetition of doing it over and over that develops it, that creates the strength of training. But there's no other thing to do but to put in those...I was going to use the term 'workout' (laughter) but I don't want to bring it down to that level (laughter). We have to bring ourselves back to our meditation, we need to bring ourselves back to the point of willingness of being still with our doubt, our hopes, our expectation or our want, when we find that we've started to entertain them again.

If we can look carefully at our hopes and be willing to look more deeply at them, or let go of them in favor of something deeper that may be going on in our lives, a direction that our lives are pointing us towards, whether we realize it or not; if we're willing to let go of these things, we don't fall into some void of darkness bereft of inspiration or beauty or fulfillment, which is the underlying fear in taking that step. In the context of Buddhist meditation and training, you actually come to a positive void, if you will, or a positive emptiness or a positive all-acceptance. I really like the term 'all-acceptance' because it doesn't imply either fullness or emptiness--it doesn't have anything to say about content, the content of our lives, the content of our minds, or the content of our emotions. It just means: whatever it is, you simply can accept it. And so that leaves us with a positive all-acceptance, and positive all-acceptance and willingness are really the same. The practice of positive all-acceptance is what really converts despair. We might as well accept the fact that, because we're human beings, we're all going to have things not work out the way we want them to--it's simply one of the ground rules of human life. Given that fact, we might as well learn to train with our disillusionment or our despair as it appears, as a result of the things that happen in our lives.

So what I'm pointing to here is a shift away from a perspective in life and training in which you think that you can somehow be entirely without any despair, or that you can live and be without any darkness or disillusionment. But instead, that as a result of your meditation and your training and your willingness to look honestly at what you're doing and the ways in which you may have broken the Precepts, we can learn to just simply accept and train with these things when they occur. After all, the hope or the expectation or desire not to have any despair or disillusionment in our lives, that's another hope and expectation (laughter). That's one more thing to hold onto and with which to create a stumbling block. Accept what arises; accept what appears in your life and when things go wrong, you bow to that and say, 'okay, things didn't turn out the way I wanted them to. My hopes weren't fulfilled'. I'm talking about this a very rational way, but when you're in the thick of it you may be pounding the wall, or at least inside your head screaming about it.

Why not just make an offering of it?; this is something that has helped me a great deal in my own life. As I said earlier, despair is something I'm intimately familiar with, just because of how idealistic a person I tend to be by nature. You can make an offering of the disillusionment or the despair and you put it right there on the altar of your heart; right within your meditation and just say, 'well, my fear was realized, my hope was not fulfilled, I feel terrible about it, but now it's time to start letting go of it.' And you can just offer it up--just think of the beauty of that. That's why we make use of altars to the extent that we do in our training, so that we can put whatever it is right on the altar as an offering to the Eternal. By virtue of the willingness to do this over and over you convert despair, you wash it clean. It allows the water of the spirit, so to speak, to flow through the despair and convert it into something positive, positive all-acceptance.

Finally, I'm going to go back to '*How to Grow a Lotus Blossom*', and look at something that Rev. Master didn't put in the first edition of her book, but she did put it in the second edition. And it was something when I was a young monk she used to talk about. What this plate, number 66, shows is a human body and down at the bottom here are intestines and guts and large arteries. And then there's a 'Knot of Eternity' looking thing here just above that. And on top of that are two kidneys and the way this is drawn, these kidneys have a...if you know anything about auto mechanics, cars have pistons, and connected to the piston is a crankshaft. And that crankshaft goes down to a sort of a rod, which is the camshaft; it's how power is transferred from the piston to the rest of the motor, to the rest of the car. The point that's being made here is that these two kidneys are in a way, much like two pistons or pumps--I guess the metaphor of just being like a water pump, maybe even a better one, since with cars you get into internal combustion and all that sort of stuff (laughter). But anyway, cars have water pumps that cool the whole thing down, and we're talking about the cooling of desire here (laughter). So anyway the kidneys, as a result of exercising the will, or willingness, are pumping water up the back and up over the top of the head and then it is coming down as a sort of a fountain or a cascade.

Rev. Master Jiyu writes: "This morning I see within my own body, a great silver pump, which is worked by my will. This causes the fountain of the spirit, the bowl of which is in the chest area, to flow throughout and over my body. As I understand this, when one uses the will to train, all despair is cleansed away and the

Water of the Spirit flows naturally”...”The secret of life is will, words are its key...Taken in conjunction with this vision and Plate Number 66, these words and that from which they are taken become deeply significant and worthy of much deep and concentrated study. Fear, which prevents one from becoming the Conqueror, is the opposite of will”. So now I have to make a little aside here: Fear is actually another very, very important word in all of this because, really, when you come right down to it, is there a difference between fear and despair? Would we really have despair if we weren’t afraid somehow to take even one little step? We think that life is so dark or so oppressive that we can’t just take one more step right into it, and this being the case, “one must grasp the will if one would cause the pump to function and set the fountain flowing. This to be beyond the opposites of fear (or despair) and will; this is the place of True ALL-acceptance and still beyond that”.

That’s really all we have to do. We have to grasp our will to train, do it in the best way we can to practice all-acceptance. That means converting our despair, converting fear into compassionate all-acceptance or willingness. We don’t have to make a grand, giant gesture or a huge leap, which somehow lands us in a heaven or a place beyond all of this. It’s the willingness just to take one little step at a time, and convert one little piece of despair or fear at a time, that does it. And we may not realize it at first but just doing that actually does cause the spiritual pump to operate and for the water of the spirit to flow.

I would like to add that, in doing this, in grasping the will, there is a potential danger which is to think that by grasping our will, it is *me*, or any one of you, to think that it is *you* who is doing the cleansing of the karma when in fact, you *aren’t*. All you’re doing is grasping the will, or taking the one step of willingness of putting a tiny bit of suffering on the altar. It’s actually a turning of one’s heart towards the Buddha, or an offering. The water of the spirit isn’t our personal possession; it isn’t something that originates with us, it originates within the universe. We happen to be part of the universe, which is great, but it’s everywhere in the universe. We have to simply have to open up to that flowing of the water of the spirit; it isn’t our personal will that makes it flow, it’s our opening up to it, our willingness to let it flow.

To pursue the plumbing analogy a little further, the pump that we activate by offering up despair allows the water to enter and flow through the pump, or flow through our little piece of pipe. But our little piece of pipe that we call ‘me’ or my meditation, or my spiritual life, is actually only one tiny part of a vast plumbing works (laughter) okay?, so we’re not actually working independently of everything else. We’re actually working along with all of the other people around us in the Sangha, to purify this karma. And so we’re opening up to something far greater than ourselves. It’s very helpful to remember this, because sometimes there are periods of aridity, and you may be thinking, ‘oh boy, this is such a lot of work and I have to grasp my little will (laughter) and no one is helping me.’ When in fact it isn’t like that--the reality is we’re all interconnected, we’re all part of this wonderful, vast ‘water thing’ (laughter). But what you do have to do is continually make those little bits of offering and effort to open yourself up to it. So, as Rev. Master said, it’s really to allow the Eternal to flow and allow the water of the spirit to flow through you. And the willingness to also look up and say, ‘yes, indeed, I *am* worthy of the love of the Eternal’. This is to be truly alive and truly one with the Source of true peace and contentment.

