

Buddha Stories and Practices
for
DIFFICULT TIMES

With Dharma discussions for teens and adults

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CONTENTS

List of Sources

<i>Story</i>	<i>Theme</i>	<i>Page</i>
Prince of Paupers	Poverty and Generosity	5
Rohini's Skin	Attractiveness	16
Cula Panthaka the Dullard	Intelligence, Wisdom & Doubt	23
Angry Bhāradvāja Brothers	Anger	33
Sariputta in the City	Others' Aggression	41
Buddha's Cousin Devadatta	Horrible People	49
Coppertooth the Executioner	Guilt, Shame & Regret	60
Kisa Gotami and her Baby	Loss and Grief	68
Patācārā's Grief	Despair	74
The Snake's Master	Suicidal Thoughts	85
Great-Wealth the Millionaire's Son	Addictions	94
Sixteen Dreams of the King	World Decline	102
Tissa with the Putrid Body	Illness	116

LIST OF SOURCES

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The Prince of Paupers

The Buddha told this story about a past life of one of his students, an extraordinary young monk named Pandita who attained enlightenment—that is, he became an arahant—a few days after having become a monk at the young age of seven.

In that past life, Pandita was an extremely poor man known by the name of Mahaduggata, which means the Prince of Paupers, or the Prince of Poor People. He lived in the time of the previous buddha named Buddha Kassapa, long before the Buddha, known as Gautama Buddha or Shakyamuni Buddha, of our time.

Buddha Kassapa once traveled with thousands of his student monks to the holy city of Benares, also known as Varanasi, in northern India. The residents of the city presented them with offerings of food, medicines and other necessities. One day, at the end of a meal, Buddha Kassapa thanked the donors for the wonderful food they had prepared and gave the following Dharma teaching:

Lay disciples,¹ here in this world one man says to himself, “It is my bounden duty to give only that which is my own. Why should I urge others to give?” So, he himself gives alms, but does not urge others to give. That man, in his future lives, receives the blessing of wealth, but does not receive the blessing of popularity. Another man urges others to give, but does not himself give. That man receives in his future lives the blessing of popularity, but lives as an eater of remnants. Yet another man not only himself gives, but also urges others to give. That man, in his future lives, receives both the blessing of wealth and the blessing of popularity.

A man who stood there heard this and thought to himself, “I will act right away so I can get both blessings for myself.” So, bowing to the Buddha, he requested,

“Reverend sir, tomorrow, receive offerings from me.”

Kassapa Buddha asked, “How many monks do you wish me to bring?”

The man responded, “How many monks are in your group, reverend sir?”

“Twenty thousand monks,” Kassapa Buddha replied.

The man said, “Reverend sir, tomorrow bring all your monks and receive offerings from me.”

Kassapa Buddha accepted his invitation. The man went into the town and announced at a large gathering,

¹ “Lay” means people who live with their families, in other words, people who are not monks. “Disciples” means students, or people who are his followers, who follow his teachings.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I have invited the Sangha of monks presided over by the Buddha to take a meal here tomorrow. Each and all of you give a meal to as many monks as you are able.”

Then he went around asking how many each family could provide for. Some responded, “We will supply food for ten monks,” others responded, “We will provide for twenty monks,” or “We will provide for a hundred,” and the wealthiest families responded, “We will provide for five hundred.” Each pledged to provide meals for as many monks as they could reasonably afford. The man wrote down the people’s names and number of monks on a leaf.

As he walked, the man came upon Mahaduggata, and said to him, “Sir Mahaduggata, I have invited the Sangha of monks presided over by the Buddha for tomorrow’s meal. Tomorrow the city residents will give offerings. How many monks will you provide for?”

Mahaduggata responded, “Sir, what have I to do with monks? Monks need rich men to provide for them. But as for me, I own not so much as a small measure of rice to make porridge tomorrow; what have I to do with monks?”

When the man heard the poor Mahaduggata plead his poverty as an excuse, instead of remaining silent, he said, “Sir Mahaduggata, there are many people in this city who live in luxury, eating rich food, wearing soft clothes, adorned with all manner of adornments, and sleeping in beds of royal splendor. But as for you, you work for your living and yet get scarcely enough to fill your belly. That being the case, doesn’t it seem likely that the reason why you yourself get nothing is that you have never done anything for others?”

Mahaduggata responded, “I think so, sir.”

The man suggested, “Well why do you not do a work of merit right now? You are young and you have plenty of strength; is it not your bounden duty while you are earning a living to give offerings according to your ability?”

As the man spoke, Mahaduggata was overcome with emotion and said, “Write my name on the leaf for one monk; no matter how little I earn, I will provide food for one monk.”

The man said to himself, “What is the use of writing one monk on the leaf?” and didn’t write down Mahaduggata’s name.

Mahaduggata went home and said to his wife, “Tomorrow, the residents of the city will provide food for the Sangha of monks. I also was requested to provide food for one monk; therefore, we also will provide food for one monk tomorrow.”

His wife, instead of saying “We are poor, why did you promise to do so?” said, “What you did was quite right. We are poor now because we have never given anything. We will both work for hire and give food for one monk.”

So, both of them went out into the city to look for work. A rich merchant saw Mahaduggata and asked, "Sir Mahaduggata, do you wish to work for hire?"

Mahaduggata replied, "Yes your honor."

"What kind of work can you do?" the merchant asked.

"Whatever you would like to have done," Mahaduggata said.

The merchant said, "Well then, we are going to host three hundred monks. Come, you can split some firewood."

He got an axe and a hatchet and handed them to him. Mahaduggata put on a thick back support belt and energetically began splitting the wood, tossing the axe aside and using the hatchet, and then later tossing the hatchet aside and using the axe.

The merchant said to him, "Sir, today you work with unusual energy. What is the reason for it?"

Mahaduggata replied, "Master, I expect to provide food for one monk."

The merchant was pleased with his response and thought to himself, "It is a difficult task this man has undertaken. Instead of remaining silent and refusing to give because of his poverty, he says, 'I will work for hire and provide food for one monk.'"

The merchant's wife saw Mahaduggata's wife and asked her, "Ma'am, what kind of work can you do?"

Mahaduggata's wife replied, "Whatever you wish to have done."

The merchant's wife took her into the room where the mortar and pestle for grinding grains and spices was kept, and set her to work grinding rice into porridge. Mahaduggata's wife grinded and sifted it with as much joy and pleasure as if she was dancing.

The merchant's wife asked her, "Ma'am, you seem to take unusual pleasure in doing your work; what is the reason for it?"

She replied, "Madam, with the wages we earn at this work we expect to provide food for one monk."

The merchant's wife was happy to hear this, and said to herself, "What a difficult task it is that this woman is doing!"

When Mahaduggata had finished splitting all the wood, the merchant gave him four measures of rice as pay for his work, plus four more as an expression of appreciation. The merchant's wife paid Mahaduggata's wife a cup of ghee (clarified butter), a container of yogurt, an assortment of relishes, and a measure of rice.

Filled with joy at the thought that they had received so much food to donate as offerings to a monk, the couple woke up early in the morning. Mahaduggata's wife said to him,

"Go get some leaves for curry and bring them home."

He went to a shop, and finding no curry leaves there, he went to the bank of the river and plucked leaves, singing for joy at the thought, "Today I shall have the privilege of giving food to the noble monks."

A fisherman standing nearby, who had just thrown his big net into the water, thought to himself, "That must be the voice of Mahaduggata." So, he called him over and asked,

"You sing as though you were overjoyed at heart; what is the reason?"

"I am picking up leaves, friend," Mahaduggata answered.

"What are you going to do?" the fisherman asked.

"I'm going to provide food for one monk!" Mahaduggata replied.

"Happy indeed will be the monk who shall eat your leaves!" the fisherman said.

Mahaduggata said, "What else can I do, master? I intend to provide for him with the leaves I have myself gathered."

The fisherman said, "Well then, come here."

"What do wish me to do, master?" asked Mahaduggata.

"Take these fish and tie them up in bundles for some coins."

Mahaduggata did as he was told, and the residents of the city bought them so they could be offered to the monks who they would be hosting. He was still tying up bundles of fish when the time came for the monks to walk to the houses to receive food, so he said to the fisherman,

"I must go now, friend. It's time for the monks to come."

The fisherman asked, "Are there any bundles of fish left?"

“No, friend, they’re all sold,” was the reply.

The fisherman said, “Well then, there are four redfish which I buried in the sand for my own use. If you intend to provide food for the monks, take them with you.”

Meanwhile, Buddha Kassapa, as he surveyed the world very early that morning, observed Mahaduggata, and thought, “What is going to happen? Yesterday Mahaduggata and his wife worked for hire so they could provide food for one monk. Which monk will he get?” And he came to the conclusion, “The city residents will host monks in their houses according to the names written on the leaf; no other monk will Mahaduggata get, but only me.” The buddhas are said to show particular tenderness to poor people. Buddha Kassapa said to himself, “I will give my blessings to Mahaduggata.” He went into his meditation room, which was called the Perfumed Chamber.

When Mahaduggata went into his house with the fish and leaves, the throne of Sakka, the king of the Heaven of Thirty-Three Gods, started heating up, which occurs when some great virtuous event is about to happen in the human world. He looked around and said to himself, “What can be the reason for this?” And he thought, “Yesterday, Mahaduggata and his wife worked for hire so they could provide food for one monk. Which monk will he get?” He came to the conclusion, “Mahaduggata will obtain no other monk than the Buddha, who is sitting in the Perfumed Chamber with this thought in his mind, ‘I will give my blessings to Mahaduggata.’ Now it is Mahaduggata’s intention to offer a meal that he has himself made to the Buddha, consisting of porridge and rice and leaf-curry. What if I go to Mahaduggata’s house and offer to act as cook?”

Sakka disguised himself as an ordinary man, went near Mahaduggata’s house and asked, “Would anyone like to hire a man to work for him?”

Mahaduggata saw him and asked, “Sir, what kind of work can you do?”

Sakka said, “Master, I am a man of all work; there is nothing I do not know how to do. Among other things, I know how to cook porridge and boil rice.”

Mahaduggata said, “Sir, we need your services, but we have no money to pay you.”

“What work is it you have to do?” asked Sakka.

“I wish to provide food for one monk and I would like to have someone prepare the porridge and rice,” Mahaduggata replied.

Sakka said, “If you intend to provide food for a monk, it won’t be necessary for you to pay me. Is it not proper that I should perform a work of merit?”

“If that is the case, then very well sir, come in,” Mahaduggata invited.

Sakka entered the poor man's house and had him bring the rice and other foods, and then told him to go and bring the monk who was designated for him to serve.

The man who had gathered all the pledges had sent monks to the houses of the city residents according to the names on the leaf. Mahaduggata met him and said, "Give me the monk designated for me."

The man immediately remembered what he had done and replied, "I forgot to allot you a monk."

Mahaduggata felt as if a sharp dagger had been plunged into his belly, and he said, "Sir, why are you ruining me? Yesterday you urged me to give an offering. So my wife and I worked all day for hire, and today I got up early in the morning to gather leaves, went to the bank of the river and spent the morning picking up leaves. Give me one monk!" He wrung his hands and burst into tears.

People gathered near them and asked, "What's the matter, Mahaduggata?"

He told them what had happened, and they asked the man, "Is it true, as this man alleges, that you urged him to hire himself out for service to provide food for a monk?"

"Yes, noble sirs," the man replied.

They responded, "You have done a grave wrong in that, while making arrangements for so many monks, you failed to allot this man a single monk."

The man was troubled by what they said, and told Mahaduggata, "Do not ruin me. You are putting me to great inconvenience. The residents have taken to their houses the monks allotted to them according to the names written on the leaf, and there is no monk in my own house whom I can take away and give to you. But the Teacher, the Buddha, is even now sitting in the Perfumed Chamber, having just washed his face, and outside the Chamber are sitting kings, royal princes, commanders-in-chief, and others, waiting for him to come out, so they can take his bowl and accompany him on his way. The buddhas usually show particular compassion to a poor man. Therefore, go to the monastery, bow to him and say, 'I am a poor man, reverend sir. Bestow your blessings on me.' If you have merit, you will undoubtedly obtain what you seek."

So, Mahaduggata went to the monastery. Whenever he had gone there before, he had gone as one of the poor people to eat the leftover food offered to the poor. Therefore, kings, princes and others assumed he came there expecting to eat. They said,

"Mahaduggata, this is not meal time. Why do you come here?"

“Sirs,” he replied, “I know it’s not meal time but I have come to pay respect to the Teacher.” Then he went to the Perfumed Chamber and bowed, laying his head on the threshold, and said, “Reverend sir, in this city there is no man poorer than I. Be my refuge, bestow your blessings on me.”

Kassapa Buddha opened the door of the Perfumed Chamber, took down his bowl, and placed it in the poor man’s hands. Mahaduggata’s joy was as if he had received the glory of the King of the World! Kings, royal princes, and others gasped at each other. When the Buddha presents his bowl to a man, no one would dare to grab it away from him. But they wanted to have the Buddha’s bowl and tried to persuade Mahaduggata to give it to them.

Some said, “Sir Mahaduggata, give us the Teacher’s bowl; we will give you all this money for it. You are a poor man, take the money. What need do you have of a bowl?”

Mahaduggata replied, “I will give it to no one. I have no need of money; all that I desire is to provide food for the Teacher.”

All the others in the crowd pleaded and begged for Mahaduggata to give them the bowl. He wouldn’t give it to them, so they gave up.

The king thought to himself, “Money will not tempt Mahaduggata to give up the bowl, and no one can take from him the bowl which the Teacher has given him of his own free will. But how much will this man’s offerings amount to? When the time comes for him to present his offerings, I will take the Teacher aside, lead him to my house, and give him the food I have made ready.” This was the thought in his mind even as he walked along with the Buddha.

Meanwhile, Sakka, the King of the Heaven of the Thirty-Three Gods, prepared porridge, rice, leaf-curry, and other kinds of food, made ready a seat appropriate for the Buddha, and sat down awaiting his arrival. Mahaduggata led the Teacher to his house and invited him to enter, and Kassapa Buddha sat on the seat prepared by Sakka.

The King of Benares then said to Mahaduggata, “Sir, when we begged you to give us the Teacher’s bowl, you refused to do so. Now let us see what sort of offerings you have prepared for the Teacher.”

At that moment, Sakka uncovered the dishes and showed the rice, porridge, and other kinds of food. The fragrance arising from the food was so inviting! The king looked at all the perfectly prepared foods, and said to the Buddha,

“Reverend Sir, when I came here, I thought to myself, ‘How much will Mahaduggata’s offerings amount to? When he presents them, I will take the Teacher aside, lead him to my house, and give him the food I have myself prepared. But as a matter of fact, I have never seen such a meal offering as this. If I remain here, Mahaduggata will be annoyed; therefore, I will depart.’”

And, bowing to the Buddha, he left. Sakka presented the porridge and other food to the Teacher and faithfully took care of him. After the Buddha had eaten his meal, he spoke words of thanks and appreciation, got up from his seat, and left. Sakka made a signal to Mahaduggata, who then took the Teacher's bowl and walked with him.

Sakka turned back, stopped at the door of Mahaduggata's house, and saw that Mahaduggata's house was filled with jewels. Everyone in the house, including the children, then walked out of the house and stood there, in shock. When Mahaduggata returned, he wondered why his family was standing outside, and when he saw the jewels, he wondered what he himself would do with all those jewels. He thought, "Today I have received the reward of the offerings I have given." He then went to the king and offered him all the jewels. The king thought, "This very day, the offerings given to the Buddhas have reached their result," and sent carts to Mahaduggata's house, to be filled with the jewels.

The king called for the citizens of the city to assemble, and asked them, "Is there anyone in this city who has as much wealth as the value of these jewels?"

They replied, "There is not anyone, your majesty."

"What ought to be done for a man of so much wealth as this?" the king asked.

"He should be given the job of treasurer, your majesty," they replied.

The king bestowed the high honor of serving as treasurer on Mahaduggata.

Dharma Discussion – Poverty and Generosity:

Interestingly, this story involves an ancient buddha, the Buddha Kassapa. What do we know about him? Very little, actually. We don't even know which years he lived. But historical facts are not the focus of the Buddha's teachings; he tells stories for us to learn, understand and practice the teaching illustrated by the story so we can experience for ourselves—to see for ourselves—the results of practice and the truth of his teaching. Since ancient times, across all cultures, stories have been a universal way to teach and an easy way to remember important teachings. This story gives an illustration of the Buddha's teaching on generosity and how it relates to poverty.

In Buddhism, there is a lot of emphasis on generosity. Why is this so? There are several reasons. To begin with, anyone can generate merit by generosity—there are infinite ways to do it—and merit is the cause of a peaceful, happy life. What is merit? It's the same as good karma—an action that is the cause for a good result. It's like the energy, goodness or seed from a good deed or a kind action, that will eventually ripen as pleasant experience or fortunate circumstance in our future or in a future life. Karma and rebirth (sometimes called reincarnation) are central concepts in Buddhism. When the Buddha attained enlightenment

under the Bodhi Tree, he saw how different kinds of karma resulted in various types of rebirths in heavenly, human, animal, ghost, and hell worlds: many good karmas resulted in birth as a human in fortunate circumstances or birth in a heaven world, and many negative karmas, or harmful deeds, resulted in birth as a human in unfortunate circumstances or birth in the other worlds.

In the beginning of the story, what did the Buddha teach the audience about karma? That the good action we do comes back to us as a similar type of result: giving away wealth results in receiving wealth, and reaching out to other people in a virtuous way results in other people reaching out to us in a good way. We can think of it as somewhat similar to a boomerang—what we give out, we get back. Or we can think of it as Isaac Newton’s Third Law, that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.

But usually we don’t see “instant karma.” We don’t see that people receive some stroke of luck or rewarding experience soon after doing a good deed, or an unlucky experience soon after doing something harmful. Sometimes, the opposite happens. The boomerang doesn’t come right back to us. That is because karma often ripens later, maybe lifetimes later. Karmic results usually are not immediate. But, the more good actions we do, the more likely some of them will ripen soon, so that we see good results.

What does the story tell us about the results of making offerings to the Buddha? Did Mahaduggata experience an equal and opposite reaction? For his offering of food to the Buddha, did he receive an equal amount of food? No, he received enormous wealth in jewels and therefore was appointed as the king’s treasurer, so he and his family would be very wealthy and respected for the rest of their lives. So, the Buddha taught us that offerings to him are magnified many times over.

What does the story tell us about being poor, having barely enough money to survive, not having anything to offer in generosity?

It tells us that being poor is the result of not having been generous in past lives.

And that even without money, one can be generous, which then generates wealth.

As a young person you might not have much money or items to offer to others, and you may be very busy, with very little free time.

But, generosity doesn’t mean only offering food, money, or things of value.

It also means volunteering time, effort, or skills to help others; giving up a bit of free time to be helpful or do something kind for others.

Sakka in the story volunteered to cook in order to gain merit.

Mahaduggata and his wife managed to be generous by doing some work, some service, to earn something to offer.

You can help others in all kinds of ways, wherever you find an opportunity to help, using only a few minutes or a moment of your time.

When you are more aware of finding opportunities to be generous by helping others and doing good deeds, you will find more and more varieties of ways to do so, and this develops a habit of being helpful wherever you are, generating more and more merit.

You likely will find it uplifting to help others, as you think less about your worries while you are focusing on others. You might even find a lot of joy in volunteering!

You can even practice generosity in your mind! You can do this by rejoicing in the merit of others. How do you do it? When you see someone being generous, making an offering, or doing some other kind act, you can simply feel glad that the person is doing something good to make the world a better place in some way.

Or, you can mentally join in while someone makes an offering, imagining you also are making the offering. In temples, this is done by the person who brought the items giving them to others to place on the shrine or to the monks, or offering the items for others to touch with their hands as a gesture of making an offering together with the others.

A more advanced way to practice generosity in your mind is to imagine things that you would like to have, and then imagine that you offer them to others, or to the Buddha. If you see something beautiful—for example a flower or a horse—imagine offering it to the Buddha.

Acts of generosity help relieve us of our greed for, and attachment to, things in this world. And this reduces our stress when we can't have them, and stress in striving to obtain them.

So, generosity is important not only as a way to generate merit, including wealth, but also as a method of overcoming our greed and attachment, as an antidote to our afflictions of greed and attachment. Does this seem paradoxical? It isn't when we consider that we need a basic level of wealth to have a stable and healthy life—where we have a safe environment, adequate place to live, nutrition and health care—which supports our ability to learn, concentrate, and practice the Dharma. And when we have more wealth than we need, we are in a better position to help others, and to support meritorious activities of others. Having a lot of wealth is only a problem when it's gained in ways that are unfair or harmful to ourselves or other beings, or when we are too attached to it or too greedy for it, when it makes us stressed or restless.

Now that the Buddha is no longer living on Earth, is there anything else we can do to magnify the results of our good actions, our good karmas?

The amount of merit earned by a good deed depends on our intent, our motivation for doing it. When we're generous to friends, family members and others, we usually we have some motivation of self-interest—we expect appreciation, gratitude or some kind of reciprocation.

Maybe you have made offerings to monks. Think about the motivation for doing so.

Some people do it because their family does it, because it's expected when you visit temples, or because they like others to see that they are supporting monks. In other words, the motivation is to gain others' approval or to conform with social norms.

Many people think of the reward from a good deed that they would like in the future, such as wealth or popularity, like the man in the story who gathered pledges of offerings from the people in his village. This is a strong motivator! It encourages us to build up good karma, which leads us forward along the path of the Dharma towards enlightenment.

But, motivation that goes beyond self-interest, beyond our worldly interests, that is, a selfless motivation to help others, gathers even more merit.

Selfless generosity is giving with “no strings attached,” that is, no attachment, no expectation, no hope of anything in return.

Generosity to Buddhist monks is similar to offering to the Buddha—the merit is multiplied. The way to make offerings to monks is not to offer to individual monks, but, while physically offering to individual monks, to mentally offer to the Sangha, the whole community of noble monastics and enlightened Buddhist practitioners of all times—past, present and future. Our motivation is to support the Sangha as a whole, so they can continue living as monks to preserve the teachings of the Buddha, and so that as many beings as possible can learn and practice the Dharma, purify their minds, and make the world a better place for everyone. This greatly magnifies the good results of our offerings!

What if we think a monk is not very inspiring or disciplined?

The Buddha mentioned that in the future there would be “yellow-neck” monks, which means false monks, but that we should still make offerings to them.

We might wonder, why we should support them? Because we, and others, still make great merit by offering to a monk as a symbol of the Sangha as a whole.

It’s our intent and motivation that matters—our strong, focused thoughts are like energy that creates effects.

Also, consider that the monk may inspire other people, or perhaps being a monk helps him live a more virtuous life than if he was not a monk.

There’s no need to be discouraged, because there are many monks living today who are truly dedicated to practicing the Dharma, who exemplify the noble Sangha by their wisdom, tranquility, compassion and discipline.

Finally, another way to be generous, and to magnify the results of our good karmas, is to dedicate the merit after we do a good deed, or at the end of our day.

That is, we share the merits of our actions. How do we do this?

By simply stating your intent, wishing “May the merit of the good deeds be shared with all beings, so they may be peaceful and happy.”

We can also share our merits with particular individuals, such as those who are undergoing difficulties, or our departed relatives.

We don’t lose any of our merits by sharing them; instead, due to our selfless and generous motivation, we gain more merit by the act of sharing it!

Rohini's Skin

There was a time that the Venerable Anuruddha, one of the Buddha's student monks, went with a group of five hundred monks to his home town of Kapilavastu (or, in Pali, Kapilavatthu). When Venerable Anuruddha's family heard that he had arrived, everyone in his family except his sister Rohini went to visit him at the monastery where he was staying.

Venerable Anuruddha asked his family, "Where is Rohini?"

One of the family members replied, "She's at home, reverend sir."

The monk asked, "Why didn't she come here?"

The family member answered, "Reverend sir, she is suffering from an eruption on her skin, so she was ashamed to come."

The monk said, "Call her to come immediately."

When the family requested her to come, Rohini arranged a cloth around her face to hide much of it and went to see the monk, her brother.

When he saw her, he asked, "Rohini, why didn't you come here before?"

She replied, "Reverend sir, I am suffering from an eruption of the skin, and because of this I was ashamed to come."

He responded, "But shouldn't you perform works of merit?"

She asked, "What can I do, reverend sir?"

He suggested, "Cause an assembly-hall to be built."

Wondering how she, as a young lady, could do this, she asked, "What funds do I have to use for this purpose?"

He suggested, "Don't you have a set of jewels?"

"Yes, reverend sir, I have," she answered.

"How much did it cost?" he asked.

She responded, "It must have cost ten thousand pieces of money."

"Well then, spend this in building an assembly-hall," he suggested.

“Who will build it for me, reverend sir?” she asked.

Venerable Anuruddha looked at their family members standing there and said to them, “This shall be your duty.”

Rohini, wondering if her brother might help direct the other family members in the work, asked him, “But, reverend sir, what will you do?”

He responded, addressing the rest of the family, “I shall stay right here; therefore, bring her the building materials.”

They agreed, “Very well, reverend sir,” and soon brought some building materials.

Venerable Anuruddha organized the arrangements for building the assembly-hall.

He said to Rohini, “Have them build an assembly-hall two stories tall, and as soon as the floor planks are put in place on the second floor, you stand below and sweep constantly, prepare seats, and keep the water containers filled with water.”

“Very well, reverend sir,” agreed Rohini.

She sold her set of jewels so that all the materials needed for building a two-story assembly-hall could be purchased. As soon as the floor planks were installed on the top story, she stood in the first floor of the building and swept and performed other duties. Monks came and sat there, and she provided water for them. As she swept the new assembly-hall, she noticed that her skin eruption started healing.

When the assembly-hall was completed, she invited the Buddha and his monks, and prepared seats and a meal for all of them. When they came and took their seats, she offered them all kinds of food.

When the Buddha finished his meal, he asked the gathering of people standing there, “Who made this offering?”

They answered, “Rohini, reverend sir.”

“But where is she?” he asked.

“In the house, reverend sir,” they responded.

“Call her to come here,” he said.

When she was called to come to the Buddha, she was unwilling to go. But in spite of her unwillingness, the Buddha caused her to leave the house and come to him.

She bowed to him and sat down, and the Buddha asked her, “Rohini, why didn’t you come before?”

She replied, “Reverend sir, I was suffering from an eruption of the skin and was ashamed to come.”

He said, “But do you know the reason why this eruption of the skin broke out on your body?”

“No, reverend sir, I don’t,” she answered.

He said, “It was because of your anger that this eruption of the skin broke out on your body.”

Rohini asked, “Why, reverend sir? What did I do?”

“Well then, listen,” he instructed her, and told the following story.

“In times long past, the chief queen of the King of Benares disliked one of the king’s dancing girls. She thought, ‘I will make her suffer.’ So, she got some ingredients that were severely irritating to the skin and made them into powder. Then she went to the girl’s bedroom and secretly sprinkled some of the powder in her bed, on her cloak, and on her goat’s-hair blanket. Then she called the girl to come to the bedroom, and then, as if in fun, she sprinkled some powder on the girl’s body. Immediately, the girl’s body became covered with pimples and boils that looked extremely red and irritated. The girl started scratching herself. When she lay down on her bed, the powder agitated her skin even more and she suffered even harsher pain. The chief queen at that time was Rohini.”

After the Buddha told that story of Rohini’s past life, he said, “Rohini, that was the evil deed which you committed at that time. Anger or jealousy, however slight, is always unbecoming.” Then he gave the following teaching:

One should give up anger and abandon pride,
And all the fetters one should overcome;
Suffering does not fall on one desiring nothing,
Clinging not to mind or body.

-Dhammapada 221

So, Rohini in the past life had been very vain, clinging to the appearance of her body, proud of her beauty, and thus jealous of the beauty of the dancer, which led to anger and ill-will. After the Buddha gave the teaching, many people who were listening attained a level of enlightenment—the first level, called stream-enterer or sotapanna (having a maximum of seven future lives in human or heaven worlds until reaching the level of an arahant), the second level,

called once-returner or sakadagami (having only one more life as a human before reaching the level of an arahant), or the third level, called non-returner or anagami (having rebirth only in heavenly realms before reaching the level of an arahant). Rohini attained the first level, and at that moment her body took on a golden hue.

Dharma Discussion - Attractiveness:

The Buddha teaches that our actions in past lives, our karmas, affect how we look in this life. Karma is similar to Newton's Third Law: each action has an equal and opposite reaction. One might ask, does a person appear unattractive due to their own fault—their past negative karma? If so, isn't it awfully harsh to blame them for their unattractiveness? And do very attractive people have better karma, or less negative karma, than others? We all have negative karmas from mistakes we made in countless past lives, and when they ripen, that is, when we experience their results, they can manifest in various ways. Unattractiveness is just one of them; other ways they can manifest include poverty, loss, failure, disease, mental illness, unhappiness, or injury. Even the Buddha suffered from ripening of negative karma from a past life when his foot was severely injured by a boulder that was pushed off a cliff by his cousin Devadatta. And, many very beautiful people suffer extreme tragedies or unhappiness in their lives. So we don't blame or judge a person for their appearance; instead, we recognize that we all are suffering or will suffer results of our actions from past lives.

Rohini suffered the skin affliction as the result of the negative karma of her jealousy and harming the dancer in a past life. Her suffering from shame about her appearance—the skin problem—was so extreme that she wanted to give up the very rare and precious opportunity to see her brother and the Buddha.

Similarly in today's world, people are so anxious about their physical appearance that they neglect more valuable aspects of their lives and make misguided decisions.

All over the media are images of beautiful people, which set impossibly high standards of attractiveness that seem to equate with success and happiness. And many people judge others only superficially, by their outer appearance, comparing it to conventional standards or ideals of attractiveness. We may have friends or acquaintances who are preoccupied with their looks. So, we can become overly anxious about our appearance—focusing on what we perceive as flaws in our appearance—constantly comparing our appearance with others and looking in the mirror or at selfies, or even avoiding social situations or photos. Although this isn't unusual among young people, in some cases it can lead to difficulty coping in everyday life. If people stare or frown at us, ignore or reject us, or bully, ridicule or talk badly about our appearance, we feel very self-conscious and this can give rise to feelings of unworthiness or depression. Poor self-image and lack of confidence might give us many other difficulties, such as finding and maintaining friendships.

Even if we don't have those difficulties, just having worries and negative thoughts about our appearance is stressful, like a black cloud over us, distracting us, sucking so much energy and time away from us.

How can we get some relief from this? Is there a way to distance ourselves from those influences that overemphasize physical attractiveness?

We can focus more on valuing inner beauty and seek out friends who value inner beauty.

We can see inner beauty by looking beyond the superficial outer appearance to see subtle indications of a person's character. Notice carefully the facial expressions, eyes, voice, and mannerisms of a person in addition to what they say, and try to detect whether the person has characteristics of kindness, respect, tolerance, gratitude, and other virtues, or whether the person has characteristics of arrogance, cruelty, insincerity, pettiness or other non-virtues.

We also can reflect on the risks and downsides of being preoccupied with outer beauty.

Outer beauty is so transient and largely out of our control; due to age, illness, genetics, habits, or accident, it comes and goes, and diminishes over time. On the other hand, our inner beauty always can be increased throughout our lifetime—it comes and grows—making us appear more attractive regardless of physical features.

Though people spend so much time and money to look better, they're almost never totally satisfied.

Some people even develop an eating disorder, or addiction to cosmetic procedures or extreme exercise.

Preoccupation with physical appearance leads to a lot of competitiveness and rivalry.

And that can lead to a lot of suffering for oneself. Remember Rohini's past life, seeing the beautiful dancer as a rival, she suffered feelings of jealousy, anger and ill-will, and then she harmed her and suffered the karmic results.

When a person's face reflects their jealousy, anger or ill-will, they look more unattractive; as the Buddha said, "Anger or jealousy, however slight, is always unbecoming."

In any event, preoccupation with outward appearance makes one constantly seek validation, attention and admiration. When admired, one feels pride and vanity, and when not admired, then disappointment and anger follow. The ego is either built up or beaten down; either way, the ego and desires become stronger and more binding, which leads to more suffering.

As the Buddha said:

One should give up anger and abandon pride,
And all the fetters one should overcome;
Suffering does not fall on one desiring nothing,
Clinging not to mind or body.

What are "fetters"? That which restrains, confines, or binds, like a shackle or chain around the feet, preventing freedom. What does it mean in Buddhism? That which binds us to suffering in samsara, that which keeps us in the cycle of rebirth, being born again and again into a world

where we experience suffering, preventing us from attaining the freedom of nirvana. Fetters include anger, conceit, ill will, jealousy, greed, killing, stealing, lying, and slandering. So, the Buddha taught that not clinging to the body, not being too attached to the body, relieves us from suffering.

We still can care about the way we look. We feel more confident and we have more self-esteem when we look their best.

We should care about our body and our appearance in a healthy, balanced way that avoids undue stress and suffering. How do we do that?

First, we can recognize that our body is not who we are; it's only a temporary vehicle for this lifetime. But it's such an important vehicle! A human body is the only body that can take us to enlightenment, the end of all suffering. Birth in the other realms, such as the animal realm and the heavens, doesn't give us the opportunities to develop merit and wisdom that enable enlightenment.

And, we can cultivate a positive attitude toward our body.

We can appreciate how healthy and strong our body is.

Even if it's not as healthy and strong as we would like, it's healthy and strong enough to enable us to learn and practice the Dharma, to make merit, and to lead us toward enlightenment.

So, it shouldn't be neglected. Instead, considering how hard it works, constantly, carrying us through all the situations we face every day, we should have compassion for it and take good care of it with nutritious food and exercise. Engaging in sports or other physical activities also helps us improve our self-esteem, feel better and appreciate our body for more than just the way it looks.

The Buddha advised his monks to meditate on the 32 parts of body, such as bones, muscles and blood, especially for monks who were too identified with their body, too attached to the body.

For those of us who have negative feelings about our body, we can think about how amazing and intricate all the body's systems are, as students learn in medical school, and how these systems are interdependent.

We can contemplate how our body is made of cells, molecules, atoms; how they are interdependent with the world around us; and where the atoms were before they were in our body, thousands of years ago, millions of years ago.

We also can reduce our stress by reducing the intensity of the desire to be physically attractive.

We can contemplate, what if I was extremely attractive and always admired? Would there would be any downsides, disadvantages? Some disadvantages are that we might have more distractions from our goals in life, and we might find it difficult to have a stable marriage or relationship, as is the experience of many Hollywood stars, unlike the many average or below-average looking people who find their marriage or relationship fully satisfying.

Similarly, many people would choose a practical car rather than a Lamborghini because of the downsides of such a special car--expensive maintenance and fuel, and worry about others being jealous, trying to compete with you in races, and damaging your car.

We can also contemplate the positive aspects of not being the most attractive. Sometimes it's more pleasant not to attract too much attention, not to be constantly observed. We don't have to compete with others or deal with the envy of others. It's a good opportunity to practice detachment from the body and humility. And we can better understand and uplift others who feel insecure about their appearance.

We can also contemplate, what if we chose or created this imperfect body as the most suitable vehicle for this life, to learn the best lessons, create the most merit, attain the most wisdom, and progress spiritually to our highest potential? In that way, our body is perfect for us!

What can we do to reduce our discomfort with the way we look?

Whenever we feel uncomfortable with our appearance, we can counteract that feeling by imagining the Buddha in front of us, looking at us happily with kind, loving eyes. He is so pleased with our inner beauty, and he doesn't value outer beauty. This exercise generates merit!

When we feel the pain of others judging us by our physical appearance, we can counteract it by trying to develop compassion toward them, understanding that they have a flaw of judging people superficially without seeing inner beauty. This exercise generates merit, too!

If we feel the sting of insecurity, jealousy or rivalry when seeing a very attractive person, we can think: "This person earned this attractiveness by their past good deeds."

Instead of identifying with our physical body and comparing it with the other person, we can try to admire their beauty like we would admire a beautiful flower or a beautiful car. This helps us overcome our jealousy. And it generates merit!

And if the person is very egotistical, selfish, hateful or harmful, that can remind us that we all are suffering with negative karmas from our past, regardless of how we look, and they are creating more negative karmas with their non-virtue, so we can try to be compassionate.

If you are with a romantic partner and see a potential rival, consider that a good opportunity to test your relationship rather than as a threat. It's better to observe your partner's behavior and see whether or not they step outside reasonable bounds of loyalty to you, than to try to isolate or turn your partner away from potential rivals, because ultimately that probably won't be successful.

Chula Panthaka the Dullard

During the time of the Buddha, in the city of Rajagaha (also called Rajagriha, now called Rajgir) in northeast India, lived a daughter of a rich merchant. When she was a teenager, her parents gave her an apartment on the seventh story of the family's palace, and arranged security guards to protect her.

Living alone and isolated in her apartment, she fell in love with one of her servants. She knew her parents would be terribly upset about it, because they intended for her to marry a wealthy, successful young man of their high social class. They definitely would put a stop to her relationship with the servant. So, she told her servant boyfriend,

"There is no way that we can continue living here. If my mother and father discover my misconduct in having a relationship with you, they will tear me apart. Let's go live elsewhere."

Taking a few necessary things that they could carry by hand, they left the palace and agreed, "It doesn't matter much where we go, so long as we go and live where others will know nothing about us."

The couple then traveled together and found a place to live, and settled into their new residence as husband and wife. A few months later, the young woman discovered that she was going to have a baby. When the time was getting close for her to deliver her baby, she said to her husband,

"If I give birth to my child in a place far away from my family, it will bring suffering to both of us. There is only one place for us to go, and that is home to my parents."

Her husband, fearing that if he went there he would be killed, postponed the day of their departure. He postponed it again and again, saying "We'll go later today," or "We'll go tomorrow."

The wife thought to herself, "This simpleton realizes the enormity of his offense in falling in love with me and therefore dares not go. But after all, a mother and father are one's best friends. Let this fellow go or not, in any case I intend to go to my parents."

While her husband was out of the house, she informed her next-door neighbors that she was going home to her parents, and started traveling down the road. When her husband returned to the house and found that she wasn't home, he asked the neighbors where she had gone. When the neighbors told him that she had gone home to her parents, he ran down the road as fast as he could and eventually caught up with her. Suddenly, by the side of the road with her husband near her, she gave birth to her baby, a son.

He asked, "What shall we do now?"

She replied, "The reason for my going home to my parents has already happened on the way. Why, therefore, should we go there? Let's return to our own home."

The couple and their baby returned to their house. Since their son had been born along the way, they gave him the name Panthaka which means wayman. A few months later, the wife again became pregnant. She again wanted to go home to her parents for the birth, so she left to go to her parents, her husband ran after her, and when he caught up to her, she gave birth to a second son. Since this child also was born on the road, they gave him the name Chula Panthaka, which means little wayman. They returned to their house carrying their two sons, the newborn Chula Panthaka and the older one, now called Maha Panthaka, or big wayman.

When Maha Panthaka became a few years older, he heard other boys talk about their uncles and grandparents, and asked, "Mother, other boys talk about their grandfather and grandmother. Don't we have any relatives?"

His mother replied, "Yes, my son. You have no relatives living here, but you have a grandfather, a rich merchant, living in Rajagaha, and we have many other relatives living there, too."

The son asked, "Why don't we go there, mother?"

She evaded telling her son why she didn't go there. But both of her young sons asked again and again. Finally, she said to her husband,

"These children are tiring me out. Will my mother and father eat us alive when they see us? Come, why not let the children see the family of their grandparents?"

The husband responded, "I wouldn't dare meet them face to face, but I'll escort you there."

She said, "Very well, some way must be found by which the children can see their grandparents."

So, the couple took their children to Rajagaha, and the wife sent a messenger to her parents that she and her children had arrived. When her parents received this message, they said to each other,

"As we have passed through lifetime after lifetime, perhaps we have not previously had a son or daughter; but these two have grievously offended against us, and so we will not let them stand in our sight. Let these two take as much money as they need and go and live in some pleasant place. However, let them send the children here."

A messenger was sent to the couple with the money from the wife's parents. The couple took the money and gave the two boys to the messenger to be taken to their grandparents. So, this is how the children came to be brought up in the house of their grandparents.

Chula Panthaka was still very young, but Maha Panthaka went with his grandfather often to hear the Buddha teach the Dharma. As a result of the frequent trips to see the Buddha, he wanted to become a monk. So he said to his grandfather,

“If you would give me your permission, I would like to be ordained as a monk.”

The grandfather responded, “Dear grandson, there is no one in the whole world whose ordination would give me so much pleasure as your own. If you are able to do so, by all means become a monk!”

The grandfather took Maha Panthaka to the Buddha and told him that his grandson desires to become a monk. So, the Buddha asked one of his monks to ordain the boy as a novice monk. The monk instructed the boy to meditate on the first five of 32 parts of the body, and then ordained him. The boy learned by heart a considerable portion of the Dharma the Buddha was teaching and stayed during the rainy season with the monks. He diligently practiced meditation and after some time he attained enlightenment as an arahant. As he passed his time in the bliss of deep meditation, he thought to himself, “Surely it is in the power of Chula Panthaka to experience the same bliss.” So, he went to his grandfather and asked permission for his younger brother to be ordained as a monk.

The grandfather agreed, especially because he loved the Buddha’s teaching and because he was very ashamed whenever people saw him with his grandsons and asked which of his daughters was their mother, he had to say that they were the sons of his daughter who ran away.

So the older brother brought his younger brother Chula Panthaka to be ordained. But once the younger brother became a monk, it became clear that he was not very intelligent. Even after four months, he was unable to memorize this single stanza:

Even as the red lotus sweetly scented
Appears in the morning full bloomed, replete with scent
Behold the Buddha, Angirasa, resplendent
Blazing like the sun in the sky.

It was told that in his past life during the time of the previous Buddha, called Buddha Kassapa, Chula Panthaka had great wisdom, but that after becoming a monk, he ridiculed and made fun of a certain monk who was not very intelligent and called him a dullard even as he was trying to learn the Dharma. This monk, embarrassed by the ridicule, was unable to learn a teaching by heart or even to repeat it. As a result of that act of ridiculing the other monk, when Chula Panthaka was born, he had lower intelligence, and every sentence he learned made the sentence he had learned before disappear from his memory. Indeed, four months had passed while he was striving to learn this one stanza.

Therefore, Maha Panthaka said to his brother, “Chula Panthaka, it’s not in your power to master this religion. In four months, you have not been able to learn a single stanza. How can you ever hope to reach the goal of the religious life? Leave the monastery at once!”

But Chula Panthaka was sincerely attached to the teaching of the Buddha and the last thing in the world he wished to do was to leave the monks and return to the life of a householder.

Around that time, a medical doctor called Jivaka, bringing a big bunch of flower garlands and various kinds of perfumes, went to listen to the Buddha teaching the Dharma. Afterward, he approached Maha Panthaka and asked,

“Reverend sir, how many monks are living with the Buddha?”

Maha Panthaka replied, “Five hundred.”

Jivaka said, “Tomorrow, reverend sir, bring the five hundred monks and the Buddha and take a meal at our house.”

Maha Panthaka replied, “The monk Chula Panthaka is a dullard and has made no progress in the Dharma. I accept the invitation for all except him.”

When Chula Panthaka heard that, he thought to himself, “He accepts an invitation for all these monks, but in accepting it, he deliberately leaves me out. Beyond a doubt my brother’s affection for me is gone. Of what good to me is this religion now? I will return to the life of a householder and spend my days giving offerings and doing other works of merit.”

So, on the following day very early in the morning, he left the monastery with the intention of returning to life as a householder.

Meanwhile, at the same time, the Buddha surveyed the world, and saw Chula Panthaka on his way out of the monastery. The Buddha went out and, arriving at the monastery gate before Chula Panthaka, walked back and forth on the same road that Chula Panthaka intended to take.

When Chula Panthaka saw the Buddha, he approached and bowed to him, and the Buddha said, “Chula Panthaka, where are you going at this hour of the day?”

The young monk replied, “Reverend sir, my brother has expelled me, and therefore I intend to return to the householder’s life.”

The Buddha said, “Chula Panthaka, it was at my hands that you became a monk. Therefore, when your brother expelled you, why didn’t you come to me? Come now, what have you to do with the life of a householder? You shall remain with me.”

The Buddha touched him on the head, and led him back inside the gate and seated him just outside the Buddha's meditation hut, which was called the Perfumed Chamber. He then created by his supernatural power a perfectly clean cloth and gave it to Chula Panthaka, saying,

"Chula Panthaka, remain right here, face toward the east, rub this cloth, and say as you do so, 'Dirt-remover! Dirt remover!'"

Just then, meal-time was announced, and the Buddha along with the other monks went to Jivaka's house.

Chula Panthaka, meanwhile, sat near the Perfumed Chamber, facing the sun, and rubbed the cloth, saying "Dirt remover! Dirt remover!" As he rubbed the cloth, it became dirty. He thought, "This cloth was perfectly clean before, but through this body of mine it has lost its original character and has become soiled. Impermanent, indeed, are all conditioned things!" He deeply contemplated decay and death, and from that he developed insight.

While seated at Jivaka's house, the Buddha, knowing that Chula Panthaka had attained insight, said directly to his mind, "Chula Panthaka, think not that only a piece of cloth has become soiled and dyed with impurity. Indeed, within you are attachment, impurity, and other defilements; remove them." And, sending forth a luminous image of himself, the Buddha sat in front of him and said,

Attachment, not dust, is dirt truly called,
To be attached is the term "dirt" truly given;
Having abandoned this dirt, O monks,
Live in the Teaching of one free from dirt.

Hate, not dust, is dirt truly called.
To hate is the term "dirt" truly given;
Having abandoned this dirt, O monks,
Live in the Teaching of one free from dirt.

Delusion, not dust, is dirt truly called,
To delusion is the term "dirt" truly given;
Having abandoned this dirt, O monks,
Live in the Teaching of one free from dirt.

At the conclusion of these stanzas, Chula Panthaka became an arahant and also acquired supernatural powers and analytical knowledge of the Dharma.

In another previous life, Chula Panthaka had been a king, who, when making a ceremonial ride around the city, had sweat pouring down his forehead and when he wiped it with a clean cloth, it became dirty. Looking at the cloth, he thought, "By reason of this body of mine, a cloth so clean as this has lost its former character and become soiled. Impermanent, indeed, are all

conditioned things!" At that point, he understood the concept of impermanence. So, in his later life as Chula Panthaka, the same "dirt remover" concept had a deep effect on him, and liberated him from ignorance.

Meanwhile, at Jivaka's house, when Jivaka approached the Buddha to offer water, the Buddha said, "Jivaka, are there no monks at the monastery?"

Instead of waiting for Jivaka's reply, Maha Panthaka instead replied, "No, reverend sir, there are no monks at the monastery."

The Buddha said, "But Jivaka, there are!"

Jivaka said, "Very well," and sent a man to the monastery to find out.

At that moment, Chula Panthaka, although he was still at the Perfumed Chamber, knew what his brother told the Buddha and said to himself, "My brother says, 'There are no monks at the monastery.' I will show him that there are monks at the monastery." And then by his supernatural power, he created an image of the whole area being filled with monks. Some of them were making robes, others were dyeing robes, and others were reciting sacred teachings.

After Jivaka's messenger arrived and saw all the monks, he returned and told Jivaka, "Noble sir, the entire mango grove is full of monks."

The Buddha said to the messenger, "Go to the monastery and say, 'The Buddha summons Chula Panthaka.'"

The man went there and said what he was told to say. Then the thousand monks there cried out, "I am Chula Panthaka! I am Chula Panthaka!"

The man returned to the Buddha and said, "Reverend sir, they all say that they are Chula Panthaka."

The Buddha said, "Well, then, go and take by the hand the first monk that says 'I am Chula Panthaka,' and the rest will disappear."

The man did so, and immediately the other monks disappeared. The actual Chula Panthaka returned with the messenger to the Buddha.

At the end of the meal, the Buddha said, "Jivaka, take Chula Panthaka's bowl, and he will speak the words of appreciation to you."

Jivaka took his bowl, as was the custom, and Chula Panthaka gave an outstanding Dharma teaching, like a young lion roaring a lion's roar.

Some days later, the monks were having a discussion in the meditation hall, noting that in four months, Chula Panthaka was unable to learn a four-line stanza, but because he never relaxed his effort, he became an arahant and a master of the Dharma.

The Buddha walked in and asked what they were discussing, and when they told him, he said, “Monks, a monk of diligent effort in my teaching cannot fail to make himself master of the Dharma that transcends all worlds.” He continued with the following stanza:

By energy and heedfulness.
By taming and by self-control,
The wise man should make an isle
That no flood can overwhelm.

Dhammapada 25

Dharma Discussion – Intelligence, Wisdom and Doubt:

This story might bring to mind some doubts and questions.

One doubt is whether the Dharma is suitable for everyone. Is it only for people with a higher level of intelligence? If so, then is Buddhism an elitist religion?

Also, on a related note, why are people born with greater or lesser intelligence?

A second doubt is about supernatural powers. The Buddha manifesting a cloth, and Chula Panthaka manifesting a thousand monks and hearing the Buddha and his brother speak although they were far away, are all inconsistent with science.

A third doubt is whether a person can reach enlightenment as quickly as the brothers in this story.

As to the first doubt—is Dharma practice suitable for everyone, or only for people with greater than average intelligence?

It’s true that Buddhism includes many complex concepts that are difficult for ordinary people to grasp, such as some teachings of the Abhidhamma.

Also, the Buddha himself was concerned, when he first became enlightened, that the Dharma is difficult to understand and is for the wise to experience, and that if he taught the Dharma, others wouldn’t understand him. Then Brahma Sahampati, a being from the Brahma heaven world, advised him to teach the Dharma, and said that there are beings with “little dust in their eyes”—that is, only a little ignorance—and some of them will understand the Dharma. Then the Buddha saw for himself with his divine vision that there were beings with very little ignorance and beings with more ignorance, beings with good qualities and beings who had bad qualities, and beings who were easy to teach and beings who were difficult to teach. And, he compared them to lotus plants—some growing in the water without rising above it, others that grow and rest on the surface of the water, and lotuses that grow rising up above the water, not getting wet. (Majjhima Nikaya 26, Paragraphs 19-21).

We can reason that lotus plants that are growing under the water have not developed and matured enough to rise to the surface, and others that have developed and matured further are able to bloom above the water. Individual lotus plants may appear less developed or more developed but really are all the same—all have the potential to bloom above the surface when they have matured. Similarly, individual people have a less developed or more developed intellect, but actually they all have the same potential to develop a high level of intelligence and to mature in wisdom. However, this takes multiple lifetimes of development. Someone of great intellect has had many lifetimes with opportunities to develop it, and someone of lesser intelligence hasn't yet had those opportunities. So, there is no basis for a person with a more developed intellect to feel superior, just as person who has graduated college doesn't feel superior to a young child in kindergarten. We all were at the beginner level before.

When the Buddha thought that the Dharma would be too difficult for people to understand, he was referring to dependent origination and the “stilling of all formations . . . the destruction of craving . . . nirvana . . . the Dharma that even [he] found hard to reach” (Majjhima Nikaya 26 Paragraph 19), the highest levels of wisdom that he had attained. When he then traveled around and gave Dharma discourses, he didn't teach at those high levels of wisdom. Ordinary people wanted to offer him food and receive his blessings, and he taught at a level suitable for them so they would be able to understand. For example, many verses he taught that later were compiled in the Dhammapada are easily understood by average people. And, he taught everyone to develop virtues such as generosity, lovingkindness, truthfulness, helping others, and patience. Anyone with any level of intelligence can be kind, patient, helpful and so forth, and this accumulates merit. And, merit leads to wisdom; it's the cause for a healthy, long and peaceful life with conditions suitable for learning and practicing the Dharma and developing wisdom. So, anyone can practice Buddhism, and isn't elitist.

What about Chula Panthaka's intelligence? He had great wisdom in a previous lifetime but had impaired intelligence when born as Chula Panthaka due to his negative karma of ridiculing another monk. So, we see that one's bad karma can temporarily impair one's intelligence, perhaps manifesting as a brain injury, learning disability, cognitive disorder, mental illness, autism, or dementia. But the intelligence that was developed in previous lives will be restored, at least in future lives.

Chula Panthaka during his lifetime was able to restore not only his intelligence but also his wisdom from prior lives, when he earned merit as a monk.

What is the difference between intelligence and wisdom?

Intelligence is the capability for learning and reasoning, including memorizing, problem-solving, and acquiring skills and knowledge useful for living in society, in the physical world.

Wisdom is insight and understanding the mind, the nature of the mind, who we really are, what reality is, and ultimate truth. It's different from understanding the mind in terms of psychology, which concerns interaction with other people and ability to function in society. Wisdom arises as the mind becomes pure—free of ignorance, attachment and aversion, and the unpleasant emotions associated with them, such as jealousy, arrogance and ill-will—as a result of the study, contemplation and practice of spiritual teachings.

People can be intelligent but not wise, for example when they are too greedy for material things and make bad decisions.

As we see from this story, wisdom developed in past lives is not lost upon death but is carried into future lives.

As to the second doubt, about supernatural powers, why should we believe that the Buddha manifested a cloth, that Chula Panthaka manifested an image of a thousand monks, and that he heard his brother and the Buddha speak although they were far away? How can an intelligent person in today's world believe this when it's not consistent with science?

People don't believe in supernatural or supernormal powers because they have never seen or experienced such powers, and many individuals who claim to have them are frauds. Folks prefer to follow the conventional, popular view that science establishes everything that is true, and anything that cannot be perceived with the five senses and scientific tools, or proven with scientific methods, is imaginary. People often criticize others as foolish, naïve or gullible to believe in anything supernatural, influencing others not to believe in it.

Of course, we have great respect for science, which has enriched our world so much, providing discoveries and advancements in medicine, technology, communication, transportation, agriculture and many other fields of knowledge.

While we take scientific knowledge as truth, that doesn't mean that scientific knowledge is the only truth that exists.

Indeed, countless people from ancient to modern times in cultures all over the world have experiences or abilities that cannot be explained by science.

For example, many people have near-death experiences, out-of-body experiences, or psychic abilities such as knowing something before it happens, clairvoyance, or clairaudience.

They can't all be lying, delusional, or making up stories. And many have no incentive to lie or make up stories.

People who have these abilities don't want or need to prove themselves to anyone who wants to debunk them by, for example, challenging them to show their supernatural abilities on public media or by challenging them to choose a winning lottery number. Can you imagine what would happen if they did accept such challenges? They would be mobbed by people wanting them to use their supernatural powers for selfish or harmful purposes. Therefore, most people who have acquired psychic or supernormal abilities exercise discretion to use them only for limited purposes and in limited contexts. Indeed, the Buddha instructed his students generally not to display supernormal powers.

Also, now that we have so many advanced technologies upon which we are dependent, and, especially with the internet, we are used to getting easy, immediate results for whatever we want. So, we don't have the need, interest, time or patience to develop our mental and psychic powers as people did a thousand or more years ago.

In any event, it's not necessary to believe the supernatural events narrated in the stories of Buddha in order to benefit from the Dharma. Just as we don't have to believe stories that our fitness trainer can lift a car with his bare hands in order to enjoy the benefits of fitness from his instructions, we don't have to believe in the super powers of the Buddha to get the benefits of training our mind according to his teachings. We can observe for ourselves the benefits—for example, more peace, compassion, resilience, awareness, and ability to handle the challenges in our lives—and that can give us confidence in the Buddha's teachings.

As to the third doubt, it's hard to believe that a person could reach enlightenment as quickly as the brothers in this story. Actually, there are many examples in the stories of the Buddha of people attaining levels of enlightenment after hearing him teach only one time. How was that possible?

One reason is that they had a lot of merit—good karmas—and wisdom accumulated in many past lives. The accumulation of merit and wisdom leads to enlightenment.

A second reason is being in the presence of the Buddha. He had such extreme wisdom and power that for many people, just being near him relaxed and opened their minds so they could easily understand the deep meaning of his teaching, even if it was just a few words.

Angry Bhāradvāja Brothers

Bhāradvāja, a wealthy man of the brahmin caste, the most respected, highest social class in India, had a wife named Dhānanjāni, who was very devoted to the Buddha. She had attained the first level of enlightenment, called stream-entry. She had a practice of praising the Buddha aloud whenever she sneezed, coughed or stumbled. Each time, she would solemnly utter,

“Homage to the Exalted One, All-Worthy, Perfectly Enlightened!”

One day, she along with her husband and others were distributing food offerings to some local brahmins who were holy men but not followers of the Buddha. Suddenly, she stumbled. She immediately spoke her solemn praise of the Buddha as usual with a loud voice.

All the brahmins heard it and were very offended. So many people in the area were flocking to the Buddha rather than going to the brahmins to make offerings and seek spiritual guidance and blessings. The brahmins probably thought that the Buddha’s teachings were wrong and evil and therefore that Dhānanjāni’s praise of him made the food impure. So, they left without eating the food that had been so nicely prepared for them.

Consequently, Bhāradvāja, who had never visited the Buddha, preferring the company of the brahmins, became very angry. He said to himself,

“No matter where it may be, whenever this vile woman stumbles, she utters the praise of this shaveling monkling in this fashion.”

He apparently had a lot of contempt for monks with shaven heads.

He said to his wife, “Now, vile woman, I will go and defeat that teacher of yours in an argument.”

She replied, “By all means go, brahmin; I have never seen the man who could defeat the Exalted One in an argument. Nevertheless, go ask the Exalted One a question.”

Bhāradvāja went to the monastery where the Buddha was staying, and approached the Buddha without bowing, without politely greeting him, and without even putting his palms together in respect. He stood to one side of the Buddha and, addressing him by his family name rather than by a term of respect, directly asked questions in the following stanza:

“What must one slay to live at ease?
What must one slay to grieve no more?
Of what one thing do you approve the killing? Tell me, Gotama!”

In answer, the Buddha said the following stanza:

“To live at ease, anger must be slain,
With anger slain, one grieves no more.
Of anger with its poisoned root,
And honeyed climax, brahmana,
The noble ones praise killing it.
When it is slain, one grieves no more.”

Upon hearing this calm response, Bhāradvāja had no argument, no opposition, no rebuttal. It was the truth, and he acknowledged that his anger was a weakness. Standing in the presence of the profoundly wise, serene and powerful Buddha, Bhāradvāja was a changed man. He knew that the Buddha was unlike any other spiritual teacher. He wanted the Buddha to be his teacher, so he requested permission to be ordained as a monk. And he then became one of the Buddha’s monks.

Someone told his younger brother, called Akkosa Bhāradvāja, “Your brother has become a monk.” The younger brother was extremely angry about it, so he went to the monastery and ranted to the Buddha with abusive, ugly words.

In response, the Buddha asked, “Do you sometimes have guests, brahmin?”

Akkosa Bhāradvāja replied, “Yes, Master Gotama, I sometimes do.”

The Buddha then asked, “Do you entertain them with various kinds of food?”

“Yes, I do,” was the response.

The Buddha continued, “Now, if they do not accept your food, to whom does it then belong?”

Akkosa Bhāradvāja replied, “If they do not accept it, it again belongs to me.”

The Buddha explained, “In the same way, brahmin, those words of scolding and abuse which you gave us, we do not accept; hence, brahmin, they belong to you.”

Hearing this, Akkosa Bhāradvāja too gained serene confidence in the Buddha and requested permission to be ordained as a monk. And he then became another one of the Buddha’s monks.

There were two younger brothers, called Sundari and Bilanjika, and they became angry when they heard what happened to their older brothers. They also went to vent their anger at the Buddha, and the Buddha subdued their anger the same as he did with Akkosa Bhāradvāja. Then these younger brothers also became the Buddha’ monks. All four brothers became arahants, reaching enlightenment.

One day, in the Hall of Truth, the monks had a discussion in which they marveled at the virtues of the Buddhas, that although these four brothers abused the Buddha, he became their refuge. The Buddha entered the hall, and when he asked them what they were discussing, they told him, and he said, “Monks, because I possess the power of patience, because I am without defilements among those who are defiled, therefore I am truly the refuge of the multitude.”

Then he said the following teaching as a stanza, explaining virtues that define a brahmana, or holy person:

“Angerless does he endure abuse,
Beating and imprisonment,
Patience his power and armed might—
That one I call a brahmana.”

Dhammapada 399

Dharma Discussion – Anger:

The Buddha says the anger must be slain, and that the noble ones praise killing it. Our first impression might be that we are to eradicate anger immediately, cutting it off completely, like stabbing it to death with a sword. But if we try to do that, there’s a grave danger that we will either repress our anger, bottling it up inside, or that we will falsely deny that we have anger, leading to cognitive dissonance and painful symptoms mentally and physically. The way to slay our anger is more like “death by a thousand cuts,” which means many small increments of pain leading to death. But rather than a thousand small increments of pain, we practice many millions of small increments of victories over our anger over time.

But before we can start slaying, we need to get ready. Dealing with our anger starts with healing ourselves. Teenagers experience hormone shifts and sometimes have conflicts in the family with issues such as control and freedom that can escalate feelings of anger. Aside from teenage issues, many of us have experienced or continue to experience trauma, such as cultural, racial, systemic, or generational trauma; trauma from abuse, neglect, loss, or witnessing abuse; or social trauma, for example, from rejection or bullying. Such traumas can cause deep-seated feelings of injustice, frustration, anger, revenge, hatred, hopelessness, anxiety and/or depression. These feelings and experiences must be acknowledged, validated and processed so they are not repressed or denied. And, those of us who have experienced trauma or who are going through teenage struggles especially need to avoid harsh self-judgment, guilt and shame. Therapeutic, healing support is important to make sure we develop a healthy self-esteem and self-worth. A support group or professional therapy might be needed to help accomplish this. To the extent that therapy offers different approaches to handle anger than the guidance here, you can evaluate and use whatever techniques work best for you, and then continue to evaluate what are the best techniques for you as you progress, which might change over time.

Also, we might be able to channel or direct our deep-seated feelings of injustice into constructive activities such as activism or joining organizations that address the injustice.

Whether or not we have experienced trauma, we need to develop a practice of mindfulness to get ready to deal with anger.

Mindfulness helps us calm our mind and take a little rest from what is going on around us and from whatever is troubling us.

It also helps us to be more aware of when our anger is arising, so we can think and respond well to upsetting situations rather than just impulsively react in a destructive way.

Mindfulness can be practiced for just a few seconds, just about anywhere and anytime.

Once we have started practicing mindfulness, and have support to handle any trauma, then we can start dealing with anger. There are five parts: Recognize, Relax, Reason, Respond, and Resolve.

Recognize:

The first step is to recognize when anger is starting to arise—we notice when we are feeling upset, frustrated, annoyed, irritated, or enraged. At first, we might only notice it when our voice becomes louder, changes pitch or says angry words. But before that happens, we can start to notice subtle changes in our body as our anger rises—our breathing and heart rate are faster, we tense up, the body heats up; maybe the stomach feels uncomfortable, or we might make restless movements.

Whenever you feel upset, try to pay attention to any and all sensations you feel in your body.

This mindfulness of the body gives you a few moments to distract yourself from the anger.

And, the earlier we notice anger arising the better chance we have of calming it before we say or do something we later regret.

Importantly, when we recognize that we're feeling upset or angry, we don't judge ourselves. We all experience anger; it's our natural protective emotion, a tool for survival to warn others not to harm or abuse us or our loved ones. It warns us that something is wrong, that something needs to be addressed. It mobilizes us to take action, for example, against an injustice, and motivates us to set boundaries as protection from abuse or from being manipulated.

Anger actually leads us toward the Dharma in that when we're angry, we experience suffering, which is the First Noble Truth and one of the Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma (the other three are impermanence, precious human body, and karma). When we experience something that deeply angers us, it can motivate us to seek relief in the Dharma.

But we don't need to let loose our anger whenever we get upset, because it's harmful not only to others but to ourselves.

Some people think that expressing anger and aggression is a show of strength, assertiveness, dominance, control, fierceness—a positive thing.

But anger is a weakness, a lack of control; even small children and animals lash out in anger.

Expressing anger might make us feel relieved, but doesn't extinguish it; rather, it leaves an imprint to do it again—it feeds the anger, creating a habit, a pattern of behavior.

Anger, especially when it is frequent or chronic, stresses our body and can result in physical symptoms such as headaches, digestion issues, sleep problems, lowered immunity, and heart disease, and can result in an unhealthy lifestyle that leads to diabetes and other problems. Anger hinders our thinking; we can't think as clearly and rationally when we're angry, so we might say or do something that we later regret and which might cascade into more problems and pain for us.

And, our anger stresses others around us—our family, loved ones, coworkers—which might result in more difficulties.

Rather than letting anger weaken us, we take steps to weaken the anger.

So, while we don't judge or criticize ourselves for feeling angry, and we don't repress it, we recognize that it's harmful and that it's important to find skillful ways to deal with it.

Relax:

Once we recognize that we're feeling angry, we need to find a quick way to calm our body and bring our mind away from the endless loop of angry thoughts.

What do you typically do to try to calm down?

We can take some slow, deep breaths; breathe out stress, and breathe in peacefulness.

We can practice mindfulness of the body: sit still, close your eyes and notice as many sensations as you can that you feel in your body. Do you feel pain or tension anywhere? Can you feel your heart beating? Notice your body's position and posture. Notice all the different sensations (warmth, pressure, weight, touch, etc.) you feel in various parts of your body, from your feet, legs, lower body, upper body, hands, and arms to the face and top of your head.

Here are some other ideas that might help you relax in various situations:

Find a quiet place where you can clear your mind, and perhaps chant or say a prayer.

Massage your forehead, temples, head and neck; or look in a mirror and try to relax your face.

Drink cool water or other beverage, which helps cool your emotions.

Go outside, and perhaps take a walk.

Do some kind of exercise, sport activity or yoga poses.

Read something other than social media, "doomscrolling," or other potentially upsetting materials.

Lay down, take a shower or bath, or listen to music.

Write in a journal, or talk to a friend.

Do some cleaning or organizing in your home.

Reason:

Next, we use our reasoning to process the anger and reduce its intensity and duration, and thus relieve ourselves from the stress and other unpleasant symptoms of anger.

Through reason we develop patience, which is an antidote to anger.

There are several ways we can reason using Buddhist concepts to identify the faulty thinking behind our anger. You can use one or more of the techniques listed below as appropriate for different types of situations.

1. Analyze the object of the anger

When we are angry at a person, we can ask ourselves, what are we really angry at?

The person's body? Their personality? Their mind? Their words? Their behavior?

We are angry at their words or behavior, not the whole person.

The words and behavior come from their mind, which is confused, ignorant, full of delusions.

If they didn't have this confused mind, they wouldn't talk and behave the way they do.

When someone harms others, they are suffering, hurting inside; as the saying goes, "hurt people hurt people" (people who are hurting inside hurt others). People who are truly happy don't harm others.

So, rather than being angry at the person, we can be angry at their ignorance, their confusion, and recognize that we also have ignorance and confusion, otherwise we would be enlightened.

2. Analyze the cause of the anger

Think about what exactly you are angry about.

Is your anger protecting you or someone else against a seriously harmful abuse or injustice?

If not, we can take steps to analyze the real causes of our anger and relieve ourselves of it.

The root causes of anger are attachment, aversion and ignorance, the Three Poisons.

Attachments are whatever we like or desire, and aversions are whatever we dislike or hate.

We like certain things to stay the way they are, and we like things to go as we expect.

We dislike—and maybe get angry—when they change or when they don't go as we expected.

When we have too many attachments, then we will experience so much disappointment, frustration and anger when we don't get what we like, and when things don't go our way.

When we have too many aversions, or when we have many things that we particularly dislike, that particularly trigger us to get angry, then we have a pattern of getting angry whenever that trigger occurs. What are your triggers? What types of events particularly get you upset?

Often, what makes us angry is how we interpret the changes and triggering events.

Our anger is a result of our interpretations and assumptions: for example, we interpret something as a threat, we assume others have bad intent or are stupid, or we assume something will hurt us, deprive us, or bring us problems or some kind of misery.

These assumptions may stem from negative experiences we have had, but if we're aware of our assumptions and patterns of anger, we can begin to eliminate them, recognizing them as thought patterns that aren't helping us but instead are making us irritable, annoyed or emotionally volatile.

For example, the Bhāradvāja brothers weren't angry generally at shaven heads, monks, or the Buddha. Rather, what made them angry was their negative assumption that the Buddha was a threat to their way of life and would make them miserable. When they met the Buddha, they found out their assumption was wrong.

Instead, we can try to be open-minded and flexible, open to different outcomes, possibilities and perspectives, and open to other ways of looking at a situation which may be better than we assumed or have benefits we hadn't thought about.

It takes practice to let go of expectations and assumptions, but if we are willing to loosen them, then we avoid so much disappointment, frustration, annoyance and anger.

As the Buddha taught, without anger, when anger is slain, we don't grieve anymore.

3. Karma

Everything we experience arises from the causes that we created and the conditions that arise to bring it into existence.

The causes are our own karmas, actions we have done previously or in past lives.

So, our negative experiences are the result of our own negative past actions.

This can be difficult to accept—we suffer so much, and yet it's our own fault? We feel innocent! We don't deserve the terrible situations in our life that make us angry!

Yes, you may be innocent now, but we all have done things in our past, including distant past lives, that were done out of ignorance. Even the fully enlightened Buddha had to suffer a terrible injury to his foot due to a harmful act he had done in a distant past life. And the famous arahant Venerable Moggallana (Maudgalyayana) died a violent death due to having killed his parents in a past life.

So, rather than being angry about unjust, abusive or other terrible situations that we face, we can calm our anger by remembering that through these situations, we are exhausting the results of negative actions from our past. While we are strong enough to bear them, we are finally exhausting them, releasing them.

The ways we react now to anger-provoking situations create results in our future.

Will we react with hostility, creating causes for more negative experiences in the future, or can we respond in a better way, which creates causes for positive experiences in future?

When others behave in ways that rouse us to anger, we can consider that they are creating negative karma for themselves; they are creating their own future suffering.

So, we can try to develop compassion for them. They are confused, their mind is obscured by ignorance.

We can sincerely wish or pray that they find peace and happiness so they don't create more suffering for themselves and others. We are then creating merit by making that wish or prayer.

Respond:

In an anger-provoking situation, instead of impulsively reacting with anger, we respond in a way that deescalates the anger or at least avoids further escalation of anger.

We can refuse to accept someone else's anger.

If someone is angry or disrespectful toward you, and you haven't done anything wrong to them, then, like the Buddha, don't accept their anger.

Don't accept anger like a victim by being defensive, don't accept anger like a doormat accepts dirt by letting their anger rub off onto you, and don't escalate anger by scolding them; in other words, don't bring yourself down to their level of negativity.

Instead, remember how the Buddha responded when the Bhāradvāja brothers were disrespectful to him. He didn't defend himself, scold them or get upset by what they said. He spoke calmly and explained that he didn't accept their anger.

You too can speak calmly, listen without saying much, or don't respond at all.

Anyone can shout or respond aggressively. It takes strength to deescalate anger.

If you're accused of something and it's true, you can learn from it. If it's false, then the person accusing you is wrong, not you, so you can calmly explain, but don't quarrel about it or try to force them to accept that they're wrong. Some people refuse to accept that they are wrong. Their false accusation is their wrongdoing, not yours.

Set boundaries, limits or rules with others to prevent future misunderstandings and disagreements.

If there is a conflict with another person, rather than simply trying to win the conflict, find a solution that results in fairness for all. Speak your position and listen to the other's position. Negotiate and try to come to an agreement without bickering, and be willing to be flexible or compromise if necessary to achieve a fair outcome.

Whenever you feel angry, then transform it into merit by making a wish that others not have to suffer with anger like the anger you are feeling.

Resolve:

Review what happened; think about how you handled the situation. Could you have handled it in a better way? If so, what would you do differently?

Make a plan of how you can avoid the repeating the same problem which made you feel angry.

If you feel you didn't handle it so well, then resolve that the next time a similar situation arises, you will handle it in that better way.

By doing this, you are consciously taking steps to improve, so you relieve yourself of guilt.

The more often we use these five techniques—recognize, relax, reason, respond, and resolve--the faster we will remember the techniques and the faster we will calm our anger.

And each time we remember the techniques is a victory of practicing patience, another step toward slaying our anger.

Sariputta in the City

One morning in the city of Savatthi (also called Shravasti), there was a group of men gathered together, talking about Venerable Sariputta. Having heard him teach the Dharma, they were very happy with what they had learned and admired him very much. They talked about his noble qualities, such as his kindness, intelligence, vast knowledge and clear way of teaching. One of them said,

“Oh, our noble master has such a high degree of patience that even when men abuse him and strike him, he never gets the least bit angry!”

Standing nearby was a man, a brahmin who didn’t believe in the Buddha’s teachings, who asked, “Who is this that never gets angry?”

One of the men in the group answered, “Our elder.”

The brahmin said, “It must be that nobody ever provoked him to anger.”

A man in the group responded, “That is not the case, brahmin.”

The brahmin said, “Well then, I will provoke him to anger.”

A man in the group replied, “Provoke him to anger if you can!”

“Trust me,” said the brahmin, “I know just what to do to him.”

Just then, Venerable Sariputta entered the city with his bowl, seeking donations of food for his meal. When the brahmin saw him, he stepped up behind him and with tremendous force, struck him with a staff on the back.

“What was that?” said Venerable Sariputta. Without even turning around to look, he continued on his way.

The brahmin felt a pang of remorse that sprang up like fire throughout every part of his body.

‘Oh, how noble are the qualities with which the venerable elder is endowed!’ exclaimed the brahmin. He ran up to Venerable Sariputta and bowed reverently at his feet, saying,

“Forgive me, reverend sir.”

“What do you mean?” asked Venerable Sariputta.

“I wanted to test your patience and struck you,” said the brahmin.

“Very well, I pardon you,” responded Venerable Sariputta.

The brahmin said, “If, reverend sir, you are willing to pardon me, then sit and receive your food only in my house.”

The brahmin then took Venerable Sariputta’s bowl, according to the custom of guiding a monk to one’s house, and Sariputta willingly gave it to him. The brahmin took him to his house and served him food.

People who had seen what happened were filled with anger. One of them said,

“This guy hit with his staff our noble monk, who is free of any offense. He must not be allowed to get away. We will kill him right here and now.”

They took clods of earth and sticks and stones into their hands, and stood waiting at the door of the brahmin’s house.

Meanwhile, inside the house, Venerable Sariputta got up from his seat and placed his bowl in the brahmin’s hands so the brahmin would lead him out the door. The people waiting near the door saw Venerable Sariputta and the brahmin walk outside, and one of them said,

“Reverend sir, order this brahmin who has taken your bowl to turn back.”

Sariputta responded, “What do you mean, lay disciple?”

The man responded, “That brahmin struck you and we are going to treat him as he deserves.”

Sariputta said, “What do you mean? Did he strike you or me?”

The man replied, “You, reverend sir.”

Sariputta said, “If he struck me, he asked forgiveness; go on your way,” and told the people to go back home. He told the brahmin to turn around and go back home, and then he went back to the monastery.

At the monastery, the monks had heard what happened. They were highly offended, exclaiming,

“What sort of thing is this? A brahmin struck the Venerable Sariputta and he immediately went to the house of the same brahmin who hit him and accepted food from his hands! From the moment he struck him, for whom will he any longer have any respect? He will go around pounding everybody right and left!”

At that moment, the Buddha approached and asked, “Monks, what is the subject that draws your attention now as you sit here all gathered together?”

They told him what they were discussing.

The Buddha said, “Monks, no brahmin ever strikes another brahmin; it must have been a householder-brahmin who struck a monk-brahmin; for when a man attains the third level of enlightenment, all anger is totally destroyed in him.” Then he said the following stanzas:

“One should not strike a brahmana,
Nor for that should he react,
Shame on one who hits a brahmana,
More shame on him should he react!

Nothing is better for the brahmana
Than restraining the mind from what is dear.
When he turns away from the wish to harm,
Thus does his suffering subside.

Dhammapada 389, 390

Dharma Discussion – When Others Are Aggressive, Hostile or Abusive:

We all have experienced someone attacking us—behaving in a hostile or aggressive manner toward us, or intentionally doing or saying something harmful or abusive to us. This usually happens when someone gets upset with something we’ve said or done; it’s not very often that a stranger suddenly attacks us for no reason, as the brahmin attacked Sariputta. So, this discussion will address generally the situations in which someone is abusive or unfairly aggressive or hostile to us, verbally or physically.

What do we ordinarily do in such situations? Our immediate impulse is to defend ourselves and prevent further attack or abuse. We feel fear or anger, our adrenaline is triggered; our body is in defense or counterattack mode. We shout, scold, or strike back with hostility. This is a protective survival mechanism, a primal reaction, a deeply ingrained habit that we all have carried with us over countless lifetimes, including as an animal, to repel the attacker.

Venerable Sariputta had overcome this habit; he wasn’t at all angry or afraid, but only said, “What was that?” without even turning to look at his attacker. Then the attacker, praising him and bowing at his feet, expressed remorse and invited him to lunch, and he graciously accepted.

This seems like such an unlikely scenario nowadays that we might dismiss it as overly idealistic and thus irrelevant to us. Even in the time of the Buddha it was unlikely: the brahmin who hit Sariputta expected that any holy man would become angry or afraid if viciously attacked, and the monks thought Sariputta’s kindness would only encourage further attacks. They thought it

was wrong to give in to an attacker's desires and that one must do something to make him learn to respect others and not attack people. A scolding or show of power might accomplish that.

In today's world especially, people generally are admired for hitting back hard when attacked, and ridiculed for weakness or cowardice if they don't stand up for themselves. When one "stands up for themselves," whether by hitting, scolding, speaking harshly, threatening, or otherwise showing power, one generally feels anger and resentment along with a wish to punish or hurt the attacker in return, to "teach him a lesson."

But the Buddha taught the monks that reacting with a wish to harm is the wrong response. So, are we supposed to not react at all, like Sariputta, to an attacker? As the monks suggested, not reacting might invite the attacker to continue attacking. We must consider that Sariputta was not an ordinary person; he had such a level of wisdom that he was free from fear and anger, detached from a sense of self, and understood his attacker and what response would be the best to bring him to the Dharma. We likely don't have that same level of wisdom and freedom from all anger, which, as the Buddha pointed out, doesn't happen until the third level of enlightenment. Also, the situation with Sariputta was unusual; his attacker was just testing him and therefore probably didn't have strong negative emotion or other motivation to continue attacking people.

So, responding like Sariputta might not be our best option to stop someone from further attacking us or others, especially when the attacker has strong negative emotions or evil intent. In such situations, we may have to take countermeasures to protect ourselves and deter hostile, aggressive, abusive or harmful words or behavior. Yet we can still do that while following the Buddha's teaching, by doing it without ill will or wishing to hurt the attacker.

How do we do that? It's not easy, as a verbal or physical attack is often sudden and unexpected, and we have no time to think about how to respond—we must react lightning-fast to protect ourselves or stop the abuse. And we have a strong tendency to react with hostility not only if the attacker is an enemy but also if they are a family member, partner or friend, with whom we feel less inhibited.

But if we react with a wish to harm, we risk escalating the conflict, maybe resulting in injury or other damage. Additionally, we create negative karma—more suffering for ourselves. As the Buddha said, when we turn away from wish to harm, our suffering subsides.

To avoid reacting with ill will or wish to harm, we need to prepare ourselves well in advance by developing wholesome habits consistent with the Dharma that naturally diminish our feelings of ill will. Then we are better able to respond in a manner appropriate to the particular situation when someone attacks us verbally or physically, or otherwise behaves in a hostile, aggressive or abusive manner.

The following preparation and habits are helpful:

1. Develop healthy perspectives about ourselves and others.

It's difficult to develop compassion, patience or respect for others when we don't have much respect, compassion or patience for ourselves. The first step is to work on healing ourselves from past trauma. Until we have made some progress in healing, we might be hypervigilant to threats or very sensitive to any level of hostility, aggression or abuse, and can't avoid reacting with intense emotions. Healing might involve therapy, stress reduction, mindfulness, and/or meditation techniques.

2. Set and maintain boundaries.

We don't want to accept or normalize disrespectful or abusive behavior by ignoring or tolerating it. So, reasonable boundaries are necessary in relationships—such as with family members, friends, partners and colleagues—in order to avoid misunderstandings, disrespect and abuse. Making agreements on house rules and office policies, and communicating about each other's particular expectations, needs and sensitivities are ways to set boundaries. Of course, we should carefully respect others' boundaries.

Clear, immediate, open and skillful communication when we feel someone is using, abusing or disrespecting us, or otherwise violating our boundaries, is important to maintain them and prevent hostility.

In addition, we should set boundaries on ourselves in terms of whom we choose to associate with, selecting people who share our ethical values and avoiding people with selfish or questionable values, behaviors and habits, regardless of how fun and entertaining these people may be.

3. Avoid escalating conflict.

The more we practice avoiding an escalation of conflict—or deescalating it—in various situations, the more likely we will respond in a way that is appropriate to the situation instead of just impulsively reacting with overwhelming emotions to all provocations.

For example, when you let a person know that they have done something wrong, rather than apologizing, they reverse the blame (placing it on you, for example by “gaslighting”) or respond with insulting words. Although that might provoke you to shout and escalate the conflict, you can instead explain how their words or action made you feel and then remain silent, avoiding eye contact, to signal that you're not going to argue and prolong the conflict. You can resist any provocation to continue arguing by saying that you don't feel ready to discuss it right now. This creates a cooling-off period without totally refusing to address the issues. Then later, when both of you are more composed, you can discuss and resolve them.

4. Practice compassion.

One of the most effective ways to avoid ill will—indeed an antidote to ill will—is to practice compassion. How do we do that? Wherever we are, we try to see how we, as well as others, are always suffering—at least mildly—in some way, such as feeling uncomfortable, tired,

stressed, annoyed, disappointed, dissatisfied, anxious, worried, frustrated or bored. That might seem like a depressing or negative attitude, but whenever we see suffering, we can wish that they feel peaceful, happy and free from suffering, and these wishes generate kindness and connection that we wouldn't have felt otherwise.

The more we understand that we all are suffering, more or less, every day, the easier it is to see that a person's suffering is a motive for their misbehavior.

And, we can remember that a person who harms others is creating more negative karma, and thus more suffering, for themselves. It's a vicious cycle. Remembering this can generate compassion in us and reduce our hatred and ill will.

When someone attacks us, verbally or physically, ordinarily we counterattack with an intent to hurt them, or hope they get due punishment or suffer the horrible results of their karma as soon as possible. But their karma operates automatically; we can't change how or when it should happen. So, those thoughts don't help anything.

Instead, we can take a strong stand, express our views, and take countermeasures to stop them from continuing and yet remember that we are helping them avoid making more negative karma and thus more suffering for themselves and others. Then, we are acting out of compassion rather than from a wish to harm.

In other words, we can show anger or take whatever actions are necessary without feeling ill will, like a parent shows anger and disciplines their child but doesn't wish him any harm.

We can try to remember that "hurt people hurt people"—the attacker's suffering drives him to aggressive behavior—and consider with compassion that he may be "having a bad day," or suffering from a mental condition such as anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress disorder.

It may be very difficult to remember any compassionate thoughts when we're attacked, but later, or over time, we can reduce our bitter thoughts about the attack by applying compassion. While we hate the person's misbehavior, we can remember that it's the result of their ignorance and delusion and it leads to more suffering; so, with compassion, we can wish that they soon find a path to a peaceful, less deluded life, which will reduce their tendency to harm others.

Additionally, we can practice compassion by wishing that all others in the world who have been attacked like we have, be happy, peaceful and free from suffering.

5. Remember karma

Not only should we remember karma on the part of the aggressor, but should remember karma on our part as well. The Buddha teaches that everything in the world arises from causes and conditions. Our suffering is the result of negative karmas that we have created in our past, including in past lives. Therefore, attacks that we suffer are the results from our past actions, perhaps from lives in the distant past.

This is hard to accept for many of us, particularly when we've suffered psychologically and/or physically damaging attacks. People console us by telling us that it wasn't our fault, that we're innocent, and that we didn't deserve it. This may be true from the perspective of this current

life, but we all have negative karmas from our countless past lives. Even the Buddha had to suffer a severe injury from an attack by his cousin Devadatta as a result of having committed a negative act in a distant past life, and the Buddha's enlightened chief disciple Moggallana (also called Maudgalyayana) was violently murdered as a result of his karma of having killed his parents in a distant past life.

When we counterattack our attacker with an intent to harm them, we are creating some degree of negative karma for ourselves, although less than if we were the initial aggressor. Even when we only wish someone harm, with thoughts such as revenge or punishment, we are creating imprints of ill will in our mind that collectively form a habit of harmfulness, the seeds for negative karmic results.

Also, dwelling on thoughts of unfairness, hatred or revenge toward an aggressor harms us by prolonging our stress and thus compromising our health and happiness.

So, it's important to try to drown out such thoughts with constructive ones such as thinking about how to prevent and deescalate future attacks, and generating compassionate and kind thoughts toward all beings.

In addition, we can consider that we are all working out our karmas during our lives on Earth, and if it wasn't this attacker who delivered the results of our karma then it would be another one who must do so, and now that we have experienced the attack, this particular negative karma is now gone, exhausted.

6. Practice patience and tolerance.

When we practice compassion and remember karma, we naturally become more patient and tolerant with others. But there are times when our patience is extremely challenged. If we think we were too patient and tolerant and thereby abused, we may feel resentment and ill will. On the other hand, if we lash out aggressively during a conflict, the other person might feel ill will and resentment. The challenge is trying to find the right balance of tolerance and self-protection that fits each circumstance, in order to avoid generating ill will and ongoing conflict.

To do that, we distinguish between instances when we truly need to protect ourselves from harmful, abusive behavior, and instances in which behavior isn't truly harmful or abusive but still incites anger and conflict.

In the latter instances, to prevent conflicts exploding into hostility, we need to patiently express our concerns, be tolerant of the other's concerns, and, with an understanding that people cannot simply change their personalities, work together toward a fair outcome and achieving a peaceful and stable relationship.

Also, we can try not to take verbal aggression too personally. If we haven't done anything wrong, if we haven't said or done anything either intentionally or carelessly that was offensive, then the aggressor is in the wrong and we can ignore the aggressive words as unwarranted and not accept them; they're not ours, they don't belong to us. Similarly, if we are given a gift and we don't accept it, then the gift belongs to the giver.

If, on the other hand, we have said or done something wrong, committed some offense, and someone criticizes us, then we can patiently accept it as constructive criticism.

7. Let go of unhealthy relationships.

If a friend or partner isn't willing or able to cooperate, compromise and negotiate fairly, or is too controlling, intolerant or demanding, we can't maintain a peaceful, stable relationship. In those circumstances, it's better for us to let it go, and release ourselves from bonds that are not helping us.

It helps to remember that everything is impermanent, and that too much attachment and desire lead to more suffering.

Friends sometimes become enemies, and enemies sometimes become friends.

When we are too attached to a certain social life, social reputation or attention from others, we might pursue friendships with those who are self-centered, opportunistic or don't share our ethical values. Such relationships eventually lead to disappointment and negative emotions.

We can more easily let go of unhealthy relationships and friendships, those that are "toxic," or "love-hate relationships," when we develop a healthy degree of detachment from social desires. We develop detachment over time as we study and practice the Dharma, integrating the concepts into our daily life.

8. Learn from experiences.

Every experience that we have can be taken onto our spiritual path as something to learn from, and as a way to develop good qualities such as patience, tolerance, and compassion.

For each conflict, we can reflect on how we could have better handled it.

We can consider aggressors as our teachers and testers who help us learn to handle negative emotions such as hatred and ill will, give us an opportunity to develop patience and compassion, and show us how we're progressing in our practice and how we can improve.

With such thoughts, we can transform feelings of ill will to feelings of appreciation or even gratitude.

Buddha's Cousin Devadatta

When the Buddha was young, he was a prince named Prince Siddhartha. He had a cousin named Devadatta, with whom he played as a child. Devadatta, however, was not as kind as Prince Siddhartha. Their difference in their character was evident when Devadatta one day shot a swan with his bow and arrow, and Prince Siddhartha ran to it quickly and saved its life, but Devadatta got angry, insisting the swan belonged to him as a hunting trophy.

Devadatta's tendency to harm others was evident in many past lives as told by the Buddha, now recorded in the Jataka Tales. Indeed, Devadatta in many past lives, including those as animals, tried to harm or kill the Bodhisattva, as the Buddha was known in his former lives.

Nevertheless, Devadatta, along with other family members, was ordained as a monk by the Buddha. He excelled in attaining supernatural powers.

Many years later, one day when the Buddha was 72 years old, Devadatta was alone, thinking, "Who is there whose confidence I can win over and thereby acquire much gain, honor and renown?" Then he thought, "There is Prince Ajatasattu, who is young with a glorious future. Suppose I win over his confidence? Much gain, honor and renown will accrue to me if I do so."

So, Devadatta packed his bed away, took his bowl and set out for the city of Rajagaha. He arrived after some time and, with his supernatural powers, changed his form into a youth with a belt of live snakes. In that strange guise he appeared before Prince Ajatasattu, who then felt fearful, anxious, suspicious and worried.

Devadatta asked, "Are you afraid of me, prince?"

The prince replied, "Yes, I am afraid. Who are you?"

"I am Devadatta," was the response.

The prince said, "If you are Devadatta, lord, then please show yourself in your own form."

Devadatta then resumed his ordinary form, standing before the prince in his patched outer cloak and monks' robes, with his bowl.

Prince Ajatasattu felt confidence in Devadatta because of his supernatural powers. He then served Devadatta morning and evening, with many horse-drawn carriages full of wonderful food. Devadatta became addicted to the gain, honor and fame he received due to Prince Ajatasattu's devotion, and ambition obsessed his mind. The wish arose in him, "I will rule the Buddha's Sangha of bhikkhus [monks]." At that moment, his supernatural powers vanished.

Sometime later, the Buddha traveled to Rajagaha, and when he arrived, a group of his student monks told him,

“Lord, Prince Ajatasattu goes to serve Devadatta each morning and evening with so many carriages and gifts of food.”

The Buddha responded, “Bhikkhus, do not begrudge Devadatta his gain, honor and renown. Just as, if one were to break a gall bladder under a fierce dog’s nose, he would get much fiercer, so too, as long as Prince Ajatasattu keeps waiting on Devadatta as he is doing, so long may wholesome states be expected to diminish and not increase in Devadatta. Just as a plantain bears its fruit for its own destruction and its own undoing, so too, Devadatta’s gain, honor and renown have arisen for his self-destruction and his own undoing.”

One day, the Buddha was teaching the Dharma, surrounded by a huge gathering including the king. Devadatta got up from his seat, and arranging his upper robe on one shoulder, he raised his hands, palms together toward the Buddha, and addressed him according to the custom as “Blessed One,” saying,

“Lord, the Blessed One is now old, aged, burdened with years, advanced in life and come to the last stage. Let the Blessed One now rest. Let him dwell in bliss in the present life. Let him hand over the Sangha of bhikkhus to me. I will govern the Sangha of bhikkhus.”

The Buddha replied, “Enough, Devadatta. Do not aspire to govern the Sangha of bhikkhus.”

A second time Devadatta made the same proposal and received the same answer. When he made the proposal for the third time, the Buddha said,

“I would not hand over the Sangha of bhikkhus even to Sariputta and Moggallana. How should I do so to such a wastrel, a clot of spittle, as you?”

Then Devadatta thought, “Before the public, including the king, the Buddha has disgraced me with the words ‘clot of spittle’ and praised Sariputta and Moggallana.” He was angry and indignant. He showed the customary respect to the Buddha and departed.

The Buddha instructed the monks to publicly denounce Devadatta and say, “Formerly Devadatta had one nature; now he has another. Whatever Devadatta may do by body or speech neither the Blessed One nor the Dharma nor the Sangha should be held as having part in it; only Devadatta himself is to be held responsible for it.”

When Sariputta along with a group of monks went into the city, he denounced Devadatta as instructed by the Buddha.

There were some people without faith and confidence in the Dharma, who were unwise and indiscreet, who said, “These monks, sons of the Sakyans, are jealous of Devadatta’s gain, honor and renown.”

But the people who had faith and confidence in the Dharma, those people who were wise and discreet, said, "This can be no ordinary matter for the Blessed One to have had Devadatta denounced in Rajagaha."

Devadatta went to Prince Ajatasattu and said to him, "Formerly men had long lives, now they have short lives. Maybe you will die while still only a prince, so why do you not kill your father and become king? And I shall kill the Blessed One and become the Buddha."

Prince Ajatasattu thought, "The Lord Devadatta is mighty and powerful; he should know."

So, he fastened a dagger on his thigh, and then in broad daylight, fearful, anxious, suspicious and worried, he tried to slip into the inner palace. The king's officers at the entry to the inner palace arrested him and searched him. Finding the dagger, they questioned him about it, and he admitted he wanted to kill his father. They asked who prompted him to do this, and he said it was Devadatta. They brought Prince Ajatasattu to his father, King Bimbisara, and told him what happened.

The king asked his son, "Why do you want to kill me, prince?"

The prince answered, "I want the kingdom, sire."

The king said, "If you want the kingdom, prince, the kingdom is yours," and then turned the kingdom over to his son to rule.

Devadatta went to the prince and said to him, "Great king, send some men to take the monk Gotama's life," referring to the Buddha.

So, Prince Ajatasattu gave orders to some men to follow Devadatta's instructions, and Devadatta told them a plan to take the Buddha's life without being caught. The men started to carry out the plan, but when the one who was supposed to kill the Buddha got near him, he became frightened, prostrated at his feet, confessed and begged forgiveness. The Buddha gave him a Dharma teaching, and the man became a follower of the Buddha. The other men, wondering what happened to the first man, approached the Buddha and then also became his followers. When the first man returned to Devadatta, he said,

"I have not taken the Blessed One's life, Lord. The Blessed One is mighty and powerful."

Devadatta responded, "Enough, friend, do not take the monk Gotama's life. I will take the monk Gotama's life myself."

At that time, the Buddha was walking up and down in the shade of the Vulture Peak Rock. Devadatta climbed the rock and hurled down a huge stone, thinking, "I shall take the monk Gotama's life with this."

But two spurs of rock that came together below caught the rock, leaving a splinter of it to fall and severely injure the Buddha's foot. It was extremely painful.

The Buddha looked up and said to Devadatta, "Misguided man, you have made much demerit; for with evil intent, with intent to do murder, you have drawn the blood of a Perfect One."

The Buddha later told the monks that Devadatta's act will have an immediate effect on his rebirth.

Some time later, Devadatta went to the elephant stables in Rajagaha, where there was a savage elephant, a man-killing elephant called Nalagiri. Devadatta persuaded the elephant handlers to comply with his wishes by saying,

"We are known to the king and influential. We can get those in low places promoted, and we can get food and wages increased. So, when the monk Gotama comes down this road, let the elephant Nalagiri loose on the road."

The elephant handlers agreed. The next morning, the Buddha, along with some monks, went into Rajagaha to receive food. As the Buddha started walking down that road, the elephant handlers saw him and turned the elephant Nalagiri loose on the road. The elephant, seeing the Buddha coming in the distance, raised his trunk, ears and tail and charged toward him.

The monks saw the elephant charging, and warned and begged the Buddha to turn back, that the man-killing savage elephant is loose on the road.

The Buddha replied to them, "Come, bhikkhus, do not be afraid. It is impossible, it cannot happen, that anyone can take a Perfect One's life by violence. When Perfect Ones attain final nirvana, it is not through violence on the part of another."

The Buddha encompassed the elephant with thoughts of lovingkindness. The elephant lowered his trunk, and he went up to the Buddha and stood before him. The Buddha stroked the elephant's forehead with his hand and spoke to him. The elephant took the dust of the Buddha's feet with his trunk, sprinkled it on his head and went back to the elephant stables and stood in his own place.

When the people saw this, and heard about Devadatta's involvement, the gain and honor of Devadatta shrank away while the Buddha's gain and honor grew greater.

Some time later, Devadatta went to some other monks and said, "Come, friends, let us create a schism and a breach of concord in the monk Gotama's Sangha."

One of the monks, Kokālika, said, "The monk Gotama is mighty and powerful, friend. How can we do this?"

Devadatta proposed that they demand five rules: (1) that monks be forest-dwellers for life and any who go to live in a village be censured, (2) that they eat begged-for alms-food for life and any who accept an invitation be censured, (3) that they be refuse-rag wearers for life and any who wear a robe given by householders be censured, (4) that they be tree-root dwellers for life and any who dwell in buildings be censured, and (5) that they not eat fish or meat for life and any who do so be censured. He said that the monk Gotama will never grant these rules, so they can inform people about the five rules, and that will create a schism and breach of concord, because people admire self-denial.

Then Devadatta and his friends went to the Buddha, and after showing the customary respect, Devadatta said, “Lord, the Blessed One has in many ways commended one of few wishes, who is contented, devoted to effacement, scrupulous and amiable, given to diminution (of attachment) and energetic. Now, here are five points that are conducive to these things.” And he enumerated the five proposed rules.

The Buddha responded, “Enough, Devadatta. Let him who wishes be a forest-dweller; let him who wishes dwell in a village. Let him who wishes be an eater of begged-for almsfood; let him who wishes accept invitations. Let him who wishes be a refuse-rag wearer; let him who wishes wear a robe given by householders. Living at the root of a tree is allowed by me for eight months of the year, but not during the rains. I have allowed fish and meat that is pure in the three aspects—when it is not seen or heard or suspected to have been killed for one personally.”

Devadatta was happy that his plan worked, and after showing the customary respect, he left. He went into the city and proceeded to inform people about the five rules, and that the Buddha had not granted them, but that he and his followers would undertake to live by them. The unwise people lacking faith thought that Devadatta and his followers were scrupulous in effacement and that the Buddha lives in luxury, thinking of luxury. The wise people were annoyed, and protested that Devadatta was aiming at creating a schism and breach of concord in the Sangha.

The Buddha, hearing about it, then asked him, “Devadatta, is it true, as it seems, that you are aiming at creating a schism and a breach of concord in the Sangha?”

Devadatta admitted, “It is true, Lord.”

The Buddha said, “Enough, Devadatta. Do not try to create a schism and a breach of concord in the Sangha. He who breaks the Sangha’s concord reaps misery lasting the rest of the age; he ripens out in hell for the rest of the age. But he who reunites the Sangha already split up reaps the highest reward of merit and enjoys heaven for the rest of the age. Enough, Devadatta, do not try to create a schism in the Sangha; a schism in the Sangha is a grave thing.”

In the morning, when Venerable Ananda went into Rajagraha to receive food, Devadatta saw him and told him that he would carry out acts of the Sangha apart from the Buddha and the

Sangha of monks. When Ananda told the Buddha about it, the Buddha, knowing the meaning of this, said,

Good can be easily done by the good;
Good is not easily done by the bad.
Evil is easily done by the bad;
Noble ones cannot do evil deeds.

Later, Devadatta held an election, announcing that the Buddha refused to accept the five rules, but that he would undertake to live by the five rules, and that anyone who is in favor of these five rules should take a voting ticket. At that time there were five hundred monks who were newly ordained and with no discretion of their own, and they took the voting tickets. Devadatta then left with those five hundred monks to another city, called Gayasisa.

Sariputta and Moggallana went to the Buddha and told him, "Lord, Devadatta has created a schism in the Sangha and has set out for Gayasisa with five hundred monks."

The Buddha responded, "Do you not both feel pity for those new monks? Go, before they come to ruin."

Sariputta and Moggallana left for Gayasisa. As they arrived, they saw that Devadatta was sitting, teaching the Dharma surrounded by a large assembly. As he saw Sariputta and Moggallana coming in the distance, he told the monks around him,

"See, bhikkhus, the Dharma is well proclaimed by me. Even the monk Gotama's chief disciples, Sariputta and Moggallana, come to me and come over to my teaching."

Kokalika warned Devadatta, "Friend Devadatta, do not trust them. They are in the grip of evil wishes."

Devadatta responded, "Enough, friend; they are welcome since they have come over to my teaching."

Offering Sariputta one half of his seat, Devadatta said, "Come, friend Sariputta, sit here."

Sariputta declined his offer, and he and Moggallana took a seat on the side. Then Devadatta, after his Dharma discourse to the monks, spoke in a way just like the Buddha, as follows:

"Friend Sariputta, the Sangha of bhikkhus is still free from fatigue and drowsiness. Perhaps a talk on the Dharma may occur to you. My back is painning me, so I will rest it."

Sariputta agreed. Then Devadatta, in a manner just like the Buddha, laid out his outer robe and lay down on his right side in the lion's sleeping pose, one foot overlapping the other. He was tired, and dropped off to sleep, forgetful and not fully aware.

Sariputta advised and admonished the monks with a talk on the Dharma using his power of reading minds. Next, Moggallana advised and admonished the monks with a talk on the Dharma using his supernormal power, until the spotless, pure vision of the Dharma arose in them: all that is subject to arising is subject to cessation. Then Sariputta said to the monks,

“Bhikkhus, we are going back to the Blessed One. Whoever upholds the Blessed One’s Dharma, come with us.”

And Sariputta and Moggallana took the five hundred monks with them back to where the Buddha was staying.

Kokalika roused Devadatta, “Friend Devadatta, get up! The bhikkhus have been led away by Sariputta and Moggallana! Did I not tell you not to trust them because they have evil wishes and are in the grip of evil wishes?”

At that moment, Devadatta was so upset that hot blood gushed from his mouth. Sariputta and Moggallana went to the Buddha, who asked them how Devadatta acted. They told him that Devadatta acted exactly as the Buddha acted when, after instructing the monks, he asks Sariputta to teach. The Buddha replied with a story about elephants who would go into a pond and pull up lotus stalks, wash them until they were free of mud, and then eat them. This was good for their looks and their health. The young calves, which had not been instructed by the older elephants, also went into the pond and pulled up lotus stalks but ate them without cleaning off the mud, which caused them to become sick, suffer, and die. Then he said that similarly, Devadatta will die miserably through imitating him.

The Buddha said further, “Bhikkhus, Devadatta is overcome and his mind is obsessed by eight evil things, for which he will inevitably go to the states of privation, to hell, for the duration of the age. What are the eight? They are gain, lack of gain, fame, lack of fame, honor, lack of honor, evil wishes, and evil friends.” He added such fate results from Devadatta stopping halfway on the path to liberation with the attainment of the mere earthly distinction of supernormal powers.

King Ajatasattu sent his armies into the kingdom of his uncle, King Pasenadi, and defeated him. Later, King Pasenadi battled against King Ajatasattu and captured him alive. When the monks heard about it while receiving food in the city, they told the Buddha, who said:

A man may plunder as he will.

When others plunder in return, he, plundered, plunders them again.

The fool believes he is in luck as long as evil does not ripen; but when it does, the fool fares ill.

The slayer gets himself a slayer, the victor finds a conqueror, the abuser gets himself abused,
The persecutor gets persecuted;

The wheel of deeds turns round again and makes the plundered plunderers.

Dharma Discussion - Horrible People:

The Buddha knew that Devadatta's addiction to gifts and admiration from Prince Ajatasattu would make his good qualities diminish, and that it arose for his self-destruction and his own undoing. Nevertheless, the Buddha didn't interfere or try to save Devadatta. He even provoked Devadatta's anger, hastening him along the path to self-destruction, by calling him a wastrel and clot of spittle.

Apparently, as the Buddha said that Devadatta "had one nature, now he has another," Devadatta's training as a monk encouraged his good qualities, but his negative qualities prevailed and overcame the good qualities. The Buddha also explained why this is so: because evil is easily done by a bad person, and it is not easy for them to do good. The Buddha pointed out the negative qualities Devadatta had: being obsessed with gaining wealth and power, fame or popularity, being honored and admired, and evil desires. Devadatta couldn't stand not having wealth, power, fame and admiration. In addition, his negative qualities of associating with evil friends and gaining supernatural powers without pursuing liberation led to his downfall.

Devadatta's negative qualities and behaviors correspond to at least one if not all of the "dark triad" of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. He craved power, refused to take "no" for an answer from the Buddha, selfishly manipulated and exploited others, and seemingly had no concern for morality and no remorse, continuing in his murderous behavior even after having learned the Dharma.

Characteristics of each of the three in the dark triad include selfishness, arrogance, craving power, lacking empathy and remorse, using others for personal gain, aggressiveness, cruelty, callousness, bullying, belittling, gaslighting, and not taking "no" for an answer.

Additional traits particular to narcissism include egoism, hypersensitivity to criticism, and demanding attention, admiration, and special favors from others.

Many people, including children, have some narcissistic characteristics, but adults who consistently have many of them are commonly called narcissists.

Additional traits particularly evident of Machiavellianism are manipulating and exploiting others; ruthless lack of morality; craving status and prestige; and being cunning, two-faced and deceitful.

Traits typical of psychopathy are destructiveness, impulsivity, harming or killing with no emotion, and being easily angered.

Throughout history and all over the world, people have existed with dark personalities—with narcissistic, Machiavellian, and/or psychopathic traits.

But in modern times, it seems there are more such people than ever before.

We encounter them at work, in school, as neighbors, in our clubs, groups and organizations, and as members of our family. Because they crave power, they often seek positions of authority and leadership, so we might encounter them in many different contexts.

We might think of such people as evil, toxic, demonic, or, as the Buddha referred to them, as “the bad.” People with dark personalities have severely afflicted emotions, their mind encased in thick layers of delusion. They may be very intelligent, talented and knowledgeable, but they have succumbed to negative emotions and delusion which obscure their minds from the purity that the Buddha teaches us to awaken to.

When we meet such people, they can be very charming because they’re trying to get what they want from us, such as admiration, servitude, trust, or information. This charm is like a mask, hiding their personality.

When we experience their dark side, then it’s extremely distressing to have to deal with them. They create toxic relationships and unstable environments. When they are our manager or colleague, we might feel that our job is threatened; when they are a political leader, we feel our community or country is in danger; when they are a family member, we feel our family is torn apart.

Our feelings of anxiety, fear, distrust, frustration and helplessness reduce our self-esteem and confidence and affect our work, personal and family life.

Emotions of anger, hatred, ill will or vengeance arise again and again.

Harboring these emotions wastes our energy and compromises our physical and mental health. As we are repeatedly offended by their behavior, we might desperately try to change them or control them.

We must understand that we cannot heal, change or control them.

As extremely powerful and loving as the Buddha was, he couldn’t change or cure Devadatta. Although he ordained Devadatta, and trained him to be disciplined and practice the Dharma to purify the mind, Devadatta’s afflicted emotions and delusions were too strong.

So, the Buddha let Devadatta pursue the path of self-destruction.

Devadatta’s ego was expanded like a balloon by the admiration of Prince Ajatasattu and the 500 new monks. Once it was so fully expanded, then it could be sharply and painfully deflated. Such ego can be deflated when those things to which they’re most attached (for example, power, wealth, fame) is destroyed.

But dark personalities fight the destruction and shame with extreme rage and revenge, so it takes many lifetimes for the ego to be deflated and broken, again and again, before they understand its futility.

As the Buddha taught, “A man may plunder as he will. When others plunder in return, he, plundered, plunders them again. The fool believes he is in luck as long as evil does not ripen; but when it does, the fool fares ill...The wheel of deeds turns round again and makes the plundered plunderers.”

As we see with Devadatta, confronting, insulting or challenging the ego of a dark personality enrages them, and this rage can be extremely destructive or violent.

Even if you doubt that they would react with violence if you point out their manipulative behavior or threaten them with consequences, they may fight viciously to save their self-image, as they cannot stand to be shamed.

So, understanding that we cannot change or control such a person, we must find ways to protect ourselves from being dragged down by them. How do we do that?

We must make efforts to protect our own physical and mental well-being.

This includes staying away from the person with a dark personality, even if we must make sacrifices to do so.

If we cannot physically separate ourselves from them permanently, then at least avoid them to the extent we can.

The Buddha taught us to avoid people who are negative influences: “If you cannot find a wise friend who leads a virtuous life, then like a king who leaves a conquered kingdom or like a lone elephant in the forest, you should go your way alone.” Dhammapada 329. “Not to follow or associate with the ignorant,...this is the best way.” Mahamangala Sutta.

Protecting our physical and mental well-being includes seeking support from family, friends, colleagues and perhaps therapy.

It’s important to meditate at least a few minutes daily and practice mindfulness intermittently during the day to enhance our mental well-being and ability to cope with adversities.

Meditation should include sending lovingkindness to, and sharing our merits with, all beings.

We might question whether we should send lovingkindness to dark personalities, the people who oppress us.

Yes, we should, as it helps to diminish our stressful feelings—anger, hatred, ill will, vengeance.

We first meditate on expanding our lovingkindness to all sentient beings.

Then, imagine all the millions of people in the world suffering from oppression by dark personalities, and with compassion, wish them healing, peace and happiness.

Then bring to mind all people with dark personalities, and reflect on the fact that they are deeply suffering, full of stress from their afflicted emotions, and will suffer more from the karmic effects of their actions. They are stuck in their delusion and ignorance. Remember the Buddha’s teaching, “The fool believes he is in luck as long as evil does not ripen; but when it does, the fool fares ill. The slayer gets himself a slayer, the victor finds a conqueror, the abuser gets himself abused; the persecutor gets persecuted.”

Let compassion for them arise in your heart.

Finally, wish that they swiftly find the Dharmic path to healing, peace and happiness, no longer harming others.

This practice may seem superficial at first, but the more we meditate and practice compassion generally, the more genuine and deep our practice becomes.

So, we practice lovingkindness and compassion for them from a distance.

But, might it weaken us, making us more likely to tolerate or allow manipulation and abuse?

No, because we improve our self-esteem and confidence from our Buddhist practice, and that gives us more strength to resist abuse.

In addition, we increase our awareness of others’ intent or deceit when we practice mindfulness.

Also our mind is clearer—better able to discern, plan, speak and decide wisely—when it isn’t clouded by anger, hatred or vengeance.

If we're overly attached to getting attention, admiration, status, prestige, promotion, wealth or other worldly things, then we more easily fall victim to manipulations of a person with a dark personality who might appear to provide such things. Our Buddhist practice helps us reduce such attachments and find joy and fulfillment in more wholesome activities, reducing our vulnerability to dark personalities.

What can we do when we must interact with a person with a dark personality?

It's best to minimize conversation, maintaining a calm, polite demeanor while conforming to basic social norms: greeting, neutral small-talk, necessary business, appropriate well-wishes. The goal is to avoid getting caught in their orbit as either their "supply" (source of their pleasure) or their enemy.

We can set unobtrusive boundaries to protect ourselves and reduce conflicts with the person. If the person violates the boundaries, we should be clear about what's acceptable and not, and enforce the boundaries consistently while we avoid showing emotion.

We can strengthen our confidence and positive energy by mentally chanting whatever mantra or appellation of the Buddha appeals the most to us, whenever we can remember to do so.

Coppertooth the Executioner

There was once a group of 499 thieves who made a living by plundering villages and other acts of violence. One day, a man called Coppertooth, who had copper-colored teeth, yellowish skin and a body covered with scars, came to them and said,

“Let me also live with you.”

They took him to the ringleader of the thieves, saying, “This man also wishes to live with us.”

The ringleader of the thieves looked at the man and thought to himself, “This man’s nature is inordinately cruel. He is capable of cutting off the breast of his mother and eating it, or of drawing the blood from the throat of his father and drinking it.” Therefore, he refused the request, saying,

“It will not do for this man to live with us.”

Although Coppertooth had been refused admission to the band of thieves, he made friends with a man who served the ringleader. After some time, the man approached the ringleader and said,

“Master, this man is a dutiful servant of ours; bestow your favor on him.”

Having made this request, he turned Coppertooth over to the ringleader to let him join the group.

One day, the citizens joined forces with the king’s men, captured the whole group of thieves and took them to court for arraignment. The judges ordered their heads to be chopped off with an axe for their crimes.

The citizens asked, “Who will put these men to death?”

After a thorough search, they were unable to find a single man who was willing to put them to death. Finally, they said to the ringleader of the thieves,

“You put these men to death, and we will spare your life and give you a rich reward also. You kill them.”

But because they had lived with him, the ringleader was unwilling to put them to death. The citizens then offered the same deal to the other thieves, but all of them refused when asked. Last of all, they asked Coppertooth.

“Yes, indeed,” he said, consenting to the deal.

So, he put to death all the thieves, and in return his life was spared and he received rich gifts. Some time later, the citizens together with the king's men brought another large group of thieves from the country to the south of the city, and arraigned them before the judges. When the judges ordered their heads to be chopped off, the citizens asked each thief, beginning with the ringleader, to put his companions to death, but found not a single one willing to act as executioner. Then one of the citizens said,

"The other day a certain man put five hundred thieves to death. Where is he?"

Another citizen answered that they saw him at a certain place, so they summoned Coppertooth and said to him, "Put these men to death, and you will receive a rich reward."

"Yes, indeed," replied Coppertooth, agreeing to the job.

He put all the thieves to death and received his reward.

The citizens consulted together and said, "This is a most excellent man. We will make him the permanent executioner of thieves."

So, they gave him the job. Later on, they brought other groups of thieves, and Coppertooth put all of them to death. As time went on, one or two men were brought in each day for execution, and he put them all to death. For a period of fifty-five years, he acted as the public executioner.

In his old age, he could no longer cut off a man's head with a single cut, but had to do it in two or three cuts, causing much unnecessary suffering for the victims. The citizens thought to themselves, "We can get another executioner of thieves. This man subjects his victims to much unnecessary torture. Of what use is he any longer?" Accordingly, they dismissed him from his job.

During his employment as executioner, he had been accustomed to receiving old clothes to wear, milk-porridge made with fresh ghee to drink, sweet smelling jasmine flowers to make into flower garlands to adorn himself, and perfumes to anoint himself. But he wouldn't be receiving these any longer, now that he was no longer employed. On the day he was told to leave his job, he gave orders that milk-porridge should be cooked for him. And, taking with him old clothes, jasmine flowers and perfumes, he went to the river and bathed. Then he put on the old clothes, decked himself with garlands, anointed his limbs with perfume, went home and sat down. Milk-porridge was set before him.

At that moment, Venerable Sariputta emerged from his meditation and said to himself, "Where should I go today?" With his mind's eye and supernormal vision, he looked at where he would be going that morning to seek food donations, and saw milk-porridge in the house of the executioner. Venerable Sariputta asked himself, "Will this man receive me kindly?" He became

aware of the following: "This excellent man will receive me kindly and will thereby gain a rich reward." So Sariputta took his bowl and went to the door of the executioner's house. When Coppertooth saw the monk, his heart was filled with joy as he thought to himself, "For a long time I have acted as executioner of thieves, and I have put many men to death. Now, milk-porridge has been prepared in my house, and the monk has come and stands at my threshold. Now I ought to present offerings to his reverence." So, he removed the porridge that had been set before him, approached the monk, bowed, guided him into the house, and provided a seat. Coppertooth poured the milk-porridge into Sariputta's bowl, spread fresh ghee on it, stood beside him and began to fan him.

It had been a long time since the executioner had last eaten, and therefore he greatly desired to drink the milk-porridge.

Sariputta, knowing his desire, said, "Lay disciple, drink your own porridge," and poured some of the porridge back into Coppertooth's bowl.

Coppertooth placed the fan into another man's hand and drank the porridge. Sariputta said to the man who was now fanning him,

"Go fan the lay disciple instead."

While the man fanned him, Coppertooth finished his porridge and then resumed fanning Venerable Sariputta who was finishing his meal.

When Sariputta began the words of thanksgiving to his host, Coppertooth was not able to concentrate on Sariputta's teaching.

Observing this, Sariputta said to him, "Lay disciple, why is it that you are not able to fix your mind on my discourse?"

Coppertooth replied, "Reverend sir, for a long time I have done deeds of cruelty; I have put many men to death. It is because I keep recalling my own past deeds that I am unable to fix my mind on your reverence's discourse."

Sariputta thought to himself, "I will play a trick on him," and said to Coppertooth, "But did you do this of your own free will, or were you made to do it by others?"

Coppertooth answered, "The king made me do it, reverend sir."

Sariputta asked, "If that is the case, lay disciple, what wrong did you do?"

The bewildered Coppertooth thought, "According to what the monk says, I have done no wrong," and then he said, "Very well, reverend sir, continue your discourse."

As Sariputta continued the Dharma teaching, Coppertooth's mind became tranquil, and as he listened to the Dharma, he developed the quality of patience, and progressed in the direction of the path of stream-entry, the first level of enlightenment. When Sariputta completed the discourse, he left the house, with Coppertooth accompanying him for a little while. When Coppertooth turned back toward his house, an ogress came along in the form of a cow, stuck him with her shoulder, and killed him. Upon his death, he was reborn in the Tusita heaven.

In the monks' assembly hall, called the Hall of Truth, the monks began a discussion. One asked, "He who was an executioner of thieves, he who for fifty-five years committed acts of cruelty, today was dismissed from his job, today gave offerings to a monk, today met death. Where was he reborn?"

The Buddha walked in and asked what they were discussing. When they told him, he said, "Monks, that man has been reborn into the world of the Tusita gods."

The monks were shocked and said, "What did you say, reverend sir? He who killed men for so long a time has been reborn in the world of the Tusita gods?"

The Buddha replied, "Yes, monks. A great and good spiritual counsellor did he receive. He heard Sariputta teach the Dharma, and profiting thereby, acquired knowledge. When he departed from this existence, he was reborn in the world of the Tusita gods." Then he said,

"He who was executioner of thieves in the city
Listened to words well spoken,
Having gained patience accordingly,
He went to heaven, and is in joy."

A monk said, "Reverend sir, there is no great power in words of thanksgiving, and this man had done much wrong. How could he gain something special with so little?"

The Buddha replied, "Monks, do not measure the Dharma I have taught as being little or much. One saying possessed of meaning is of surpassing merit."

So saying, he instructed them in the Dharma by pronouncing the following stanzas:

Though a thousand speeches
Are made of meaningless lines,
Better the single meaningful line
By hearing which one is at peace.

Dhammapada 100

Dharma Discussion – Guilt and Regret:

This story has some surprises. It's surprising that one of the most advanced of the Buddha's monks, Venerable Sariputta, would go to Coppertooth's home. Sariputta, like the Buddha, went to visit people whom he knew would most benefit from hearing the Dharma—those whose minds were open to hearing it, and who had enough merit to appreciate and understand the Dharma, so they would progress toward enlightenment.

How could Coppertooth be such a person?

And why would Sariputta think of him as “this excellent man?”

We would assume that someone who callously kills people for a living, who apparently has no compassion, would not have developed much merit.

But maybe we can glean something about his character from the description of his appearance. His scars suggest he had many injuries from experiencing violence, and his copper-colored teeth suggest he had suffered neglect, poverty or unhealthy conditions.

Perhaps these experiences resulted in callousness, desperation and willingness to take whatever job was available.

Nevertheless, Coppertooth felt joy when he saw the monk at his door, and immediately offered his own food although it was the last meal he would get for his work and he hadn't eaten in a while.

So, he valued making merit, was generous, and appreciated spiritual opportunities.

And he did gain a rich reward, as Sariputta predicted, by progressing spiritually upon hearing the Dharma. So, he indeed did have significant merit and good qualities, presumably developed in past lives, despite the violent actions he did as an executioner.

One lesson from this story is that we can't judge someone simply by observing their current behavior and appearance. We might recall the story of Angulimala, the serial murderer who was transformed and became a monk after he met the Buddha, who displayed his supernatural powers to break through Angulimala's thick mental obscurations and reveal his good qualities.

Another surprise in this story is that Venerable Sariputta used a bit of trickery, with a wise choice of words, to break through and release Coppertooth's feeling of guilt.

With his deep wisdom, Sariputta knew what he had to do to help Coppertooth.

When Coppertooth listened to a discourse on noble qualities knowing that he had committed deathly violence against so many people, cognitive dissonance arose.

That heavy burden of guilt conflicted with the talk about purity, so he couldn't focus.

So, Sariputta relaxed and opened Coppertooth's mind by relieving him of guilt, suggesting that killing because one was made to do it by others is not so wrong or blameworthy as killing from one's own free will, for example due to hate or cruelty.

Yet another surprise is that only from hearing a few words of the Dharma, Coppertooth's thoughts were so pure that he went to Tusita heaven when he died.

The Buddha taught that the world one is next born into is influenced not only the good and bad karma one has, but also the thoughts one has at the moment of death.

Therefore, it's very important not to carry a burden of guilt.

But if we have no guilt, shame, regret or remorse for our wrong actions, is that healthy? Certainly a psychopath or sociopath, defined in part as one who has no remorse, is not healthy!

First, let's distinguish shame, guilt, regret and remorse:

Guilt is the feeling of having done something bad, or of failing to do what was expected.

Shame is the feeling of being a bad person or unworthy for having done wrong or failing what was expected.

Regret is the acknowledgment of wrongdoing, making a mistake or failure to do what was expected and wishing we hadn't done so.

Remorse is the feeling of having wronged or harmed someone and wishing to make amends.

Regret and remorse mean "owning" our mistake, learning from it and intending to do better from now on.

They can be constructive feelings, confessions to ourselves that we did something wrong, along with determination not to do it again.

On the other hand, guilt and shame are destructive feelings of having failed, and they may generate feelings of low self-esteem or unworthiness.

Any of these feelings can arise after we say or do something during moments of anger, revenge, hate, recklessness, impulsivity, or selfishness.

But regret can arise in countless additional contexts. For example, we regret failing to act when we were distracted. We regret wasting time, or missing an opportunity. We regret making a bad decision. We regret being ignorant or tolerant of someone abusing or manipulating us. Or we regret that we didn't help or save a person or animal, or that we didn't prevent a disaster when we could have done so.

Sometimes the impact of our mistake or failure is immense, not only on ourselves but also on others.

For example, Venerable Ananda, the Buddha's attendant, deeply regretted being distracted and failing to respond appropriately when the Buddha suggested Ananda could ask him to live longer. As a result, the Buddha didn't extend his lifespan. Later, Ananda was reprimanded for such failure by Venerable Kassapa, one of the most senior members of the Sangha.

The psychological impact can be overwhelming, especially when we are not as spiritually advanced as Venerable Ananda.

Sometimes people try to avoid the painful feelings of guilt or shame by denying or diminishing what happened, by blaming others, or by making excuses.

Feelings of guilt, shame, regret or remorse might preoccupy and agitate our mind so much that we "beat ourselves up" or engage in self-condemnation. Some people harbor unresolved guilt or self-blame throughout their entire lives.

We might try to constantly distract ourselves from those feelings with entertainment and other dopamine-inducing activities—social media, gaming, videos, partying, shopping and so forth.

Whether we engage in self-reproach or in constant distraction, they interfere with our ability to engage in healthier and more constructive activities.

Even if we we're not having such intense thoughts and feelings, we might find it difficult to listen to someone teach about such lofty topics as lovingkindness, compassion and patience. It seems too saccharine sweet when in the back of our mind are dark thoughts—we hope that a competitor loses, we wish a certain horrible person would suffer, or we're plotting revenge against someone who hurt us. We might avoid listening to the Dharma because, like Coppertooth, we experience cognitive dissonance when we hear it.

However, instead of turning away from the Dharma, or feeling bad about ourselves, or beating ourselves up, we can use regret or remorse to further ourselves along the path of the Dharma. We use our failures, regret and remorse to motivate us like a springboard—the painful feelings propel us to seek relief in a constructive way.

Whenever we make a mistake that triggers feelings of regret or remorse, we can do the following practice, the Four Powers of Purification, that gives us relief and leads us forward on the path to peace, happiness and enlightenment. Although it is taught in the Vajrayana Buddhist tradition, it can be practiced by anyone. It can be practiced at the end of each day to purify all the mistakes we have made that day.

The Four Powers of Purification (The 4 Rs):

1. Remorse/Regret

First, we recognize—confess to ourselves—that we made a mistake; we did something we wish we hadn't done, or we didn't do something we wish we had done.

Then, we are mindful of our thoughts. We notice whether we are identifying ourselves with our actions, caught in a habit of guilty or shameful thoughts such as "I'm a failure, "how could I be so stupid," "no wonder people don't like me," "I guess no one wants to trust me anymore," "I always mess things up."

Let go of those thoughts by allowing the mistake to feel like something external; it feels like dirt on our body or poison that we have ingested, and we want to get rid of it.

Consider that the mistake is a negative karma, an imprint in our mind, and guilt about it can hinder spiritual development, so now we are reducing the negative karma and increasing our merit (positive karma) by this confession and spiritual practice.

Remember that our mistakes are useful. Dealing with our mistakes gives us knowledge not only to avoid repeating similar errors, but also to advise others who make similar mistakes or are in similar situations. Also, it gives us more understanding, tolerance and compassion toward others when they make similar mistakes.

2. Remedy/Antidote

The next power is to find a remedy for our mistake; get rid of the poison, wash the dirt away. We do something positive to counteract the negative act, for example:

- apologize and make amends to the person we harmed, and wish them peace and happiness
- generate lovingkindness and compassion for all beings through prayer, meditation
- practice any form of meditation
- chant prayers, Buddhist stanzas, or a mantra
- volunteer to help someone, do volunteer work or service for someone in need, or do random acts of kindness.

3. Resolution/Restraint

The third power is to resolve not to repeat our behavior, not to do the negative act again.

We exercise caution so we don't fall into the same actions.

Recognizing that we acted without awareness, we are determined to be more aware so we don't make the same mistake.

We analyze what factors led to our mistake, but only to the extent that it's constructive in helping us avoid repeating it; we shouldn't ruminate over it.

For acts that are habits or that are difficult to stop completely, such as losing our temper, we can just resolve not to do them for a specific period of time, such as one day. Then, over time, we try to increase the period of time. We develop confidence one step at a time in our ability to change for the better, and don't get upset with relapses; we just keep our determination and start again. Like we learn to do many things in life, we try and try again, and fail and fail again—but we keep up our determination.

4. Reliance/Refuge

We need help to be firm in our determination, to carry through our resolution.

We have to rely on a dependable, trusted guide to show us the path. So, we take refuge in the Buddha who is like a doctor whose medicine, the Dharma, purifies our actions. And we take refuge in the Sangha, the community of noble monks and Dharma practitioners who can offer us support. The Buddha, Dharma and Sangha give us confidence that others are also working to overcome their weaknesses and persevering on the path to true peace and happiness.

We can bring to mind a form of the Buddha that is most familiar to us (or a sphere of light representing enlightenment), and request the Buddha's help and guidance in overcoming our mistakes, and strength to carry through our resolutions.

We can meditate, visualizing that we are laying in a cool, cascading mountain stream, and the water flows gently over our body, refreshing and purifying it. Then it flows inside our body from our head to our toes, washing away all our busy thoughts and emotions.

Next, the water becomes a warm waterfall of light that falls gently on the top of our head and cascades down over our body, and then flows inside our body, washing away all remaining negative feelings—all stress, worry, guilt, shame, and any subtle negative emotions are washed away by the waterfall of light, like a shower washes away dirt from our body.

Next, imagine that the Buddha is smiling at you, and says that all is forgiven, all is purified.

Finally, we share the merit of our practice with all sentient beings, and especially all those whom we have hurt, wishing that they be happy, peaceful and free from suffering.

Kisa Gotami and her Baby

A young lady named Kisa Gotami was born to a poor family, but she got married to a young man from a wealthy family and thereafter, became pregnant and gave birth to a son. However, the child died when he was a little toddler, at the time he was first able to walk.

Kisa Gotami was not familiar with death; she had never known anyone who had died. When people came to take the baby's body for cremation, she was in such shock over the death—the loss of her only son—that she didn't allow them to take the body. She made them leave her house. She refused to believe that her son had died.

She said to herself, "I will seek medicine for my son."

Holding the dead child on her hip, she went from house to house, inquiring, "Do you know anything that will cure my son?"

In response, people said to her, "Woman, you are stark raving mad that you go from house to house seeking medicine for your dead child!"

But she went on her way, thinking, "Surely I shall find someone who knows a medicine for my child."

A wise man saw her and thought to himself, "This young woman has no doubt borne and lost her first and only child, and has not seen death before. I must help her."

So, he said to her, "I myself do not know how to cure your child, but I know of one who has this knowledge."

She responded, "Sir, who is it that knows?"

He told her, "The Buddha knows; go and ask him."

She said, "Good, sir, I will go and ask him."

She went to the Buddha, and after greeting him, asked, "Venerable sir, is it true, as men say, that you know how to cure my child?"

The Buddha replied, "Yes, I know."

Anxious to go out and find whatever medicine he might recommend, she asked, "What shall I get?"

He said, "A pinch of white mustard seed."

She responded, “I will get that, venerable sir. But in whose house shall I get it?”

The Buddha said, “In the house where neither son nor daughter nor any other has yet died.”

With renewed hope to cure her child, Kisa Gotami said, “Very well, venerable sir,” and respectfully departed.

Placing her dead child on her hip, she entered the village. She stopped at the door of the very first house and when the owners appeared, she asked, “Have you here any white mustard seed? They say it will cure my child.”

Responding affirmatively, the owners of the house brought some white mustard seed and gave it to her. She asked,

“Friends, in the house where you dwell, has any son or daughter yet died?”

The owners said, “What are you saying? As for the living, there are few; only the dead are many.”

That meant that many people had died in that family. So, Kisa Gotami was disappointed and said,

“Well then, take back your mustard seed; that is no medicine for my child.”

In the same manner, she went inquiring from house to house. There was not a single house where she found the mustard seed she sought; in every family there was someone who had died. When evening came, she thought, “Ah, it is a difficult task I took upon myself. I thought that I alone had lost a child, but in every village, the dead are more in number than the living.”

While she contemplated that fact, her heart—which until then was soft with a mother’s love—became firm. She took the dead child and buried his body in the forest. Then she went to the Buddha and greeted him.

The Buddha asked her, “Did you get the pinch of mustard seed?”

She replied, “No, I did not, venerable sir. In every village the dead are more in number than the living.”

The Buddha responded, “You imagined vainly that you alone had lost a child. But all living beings are subject to an unchanging law, and it is this: The Prince of Death, like a raging torrent, sweeps away into the sea of ruin all living beings, but still their longings are unfulfilled.”

Instructing her in the Dharma, he said this stanza:

In flocks and children finding delight
With a mind clinging – just such a man
Death seizes and carries away
As a great flood a sleeping village.

As the Buddha uttered that last part of the stanza, Kisa Gotami became established in the first level of enlightenment, the stage of stream entry. Others who were present, hearing the teaching, also attained the first, second or third level of enlightenment. Kisa Gotami then requested the Buddha to let her be ordained as a nun. He sent her to the Order of Nuns, directing that they ordain her. Afterward she was accepted as a nun and came to be known as Bhikkhuni Kisa Gotami.

One day, it was her turn to light the lamps in the meditation hall. Having lit the lamp, she sat down and watched the flames of the lamp. Some flames flared up and some flickered out. She took this as the subject of her meditation and contemplated, “Even as it is with these flames, so also is it with living beings here in the world: some flare up, while others flicker out; only those who have reached Nirvana are no more seen.”

The Buddha, seated in his meditation cottage known as the Perfumed Chamber, sent forth a radiant image of himself, which stood face to face with Kisa Gotami and said, “Even as it is with these flames, so also is it with living beings here in the world: some flare up, while others flicker out; only those who have reached Nirvana are no more seen. Therefore, better is the life for one who sees Nirvana, though living but for an instant, than the lives of those who endure for a hundred years and yet do not see Nirvana.”

And he instructed her further with the following stanza:

Though one should live a hundred years,
Not seeing the Deathless State,
Yet better is life for a single day
For one who sees the Deathless state.

Dhammapada 114

At the end of the discourse, Kisa Gotami, even as she sat there, attained arahantship—liberation from the cycle of birth and death (samsara)—together with the analytical knowledges.

Dharma Discussion – Loss and Grief:

Kisa Gotami was in denial that her child had died. She clung to hope, thinking that everything would be okay if she could just get the right medicine. Why was she in denial? She had never

experienced a loss as devastating as death of a loved one. All her hopes, dreams and expectations were shattered.

This story illustrates the universality and intensity of the grief and devastation we experience from loss of a loved one, and provides the Buddha's guidance to help us heal from it. This guidance can be practiced now to strengthen us and reduce the intensity of our grief whenever it arises in the future, so it doesn't become so overwhelming.

The Buddha describes how pain proliferates to become overwhelming in the Two Arrows Sutta (Sallatha Sutta, Samyutta Nikaya 36.6 of the Pali Canon). In that Sutta, the Buddha presents an allegory about two arrows. He explains that when an ordinary person experiences a great pain, he not only feels the physical pain, but he also feels a second type of pain—the mental pain of grieving, lamenting, and becoming distraught. This is analogous to being struck not only by a single arrow, but also being struck by a second arrow. The Buddha explains that the second type of pain is resistance and obsession, trying to fight the pain and obsessing over it. The ordinary person sees no escape from that pain except for some kind of sensual pleasure, which he then becomes obsessed with. So, he is then entangled not only in pain but also in seeking pleasures, and the suffering and stress they cause. The Buddha contrasts that with someone who is well instructed in the Dharma, who does not grieve, lament or become distraught, because he does not resist or obsess over the initial painful feeling. He doesn't fight it. He also doesn't try to distract himself with some kind of sensual pleasure because he knows he can escape from the pain by a better method: he merely senses the pain but doesn't get attached to it or obsessed with it. He discerns the feeling as it is actually present—the origination, passing away, allure, drawback and escape from the feeling.

So, in the context of loss of a loved one, what do the first and second arrow represent?

The first arrow is the inevitable shock, pain and sadness of loss, which is experienced even by advanced Dharma practitioners.

The second arrow is the proliferation of reactions and emotions in response to the loss, which might include emotions such as regret, fear, anxiety, guilt, self-pity, worthlessness, helplessness, despair or anger. These emotions arise from resisting the pain and obsessing over it, including thoughts such as, "this is tragic, unbearable," "this should never have happened," "he didn't deserve to die so young," "why didn't they do something to save him?" "I could have done something to prevent his death," "my life is useless now," "how could this have happened?" The second arrow causes the most intense and prolonged suffering, and as the Buddha explains, it can be avoided or reduced by understanding, mindfulness and insight.

As the Buddha taught Kisa Gotami, we must accept that everyone faces the death of a loved one, and it can happen at any time.

In the Two Arrows Sutta, the Buddha advises us not to distract ourselves with some temporary pleasure, because it isn't a lasting solution; it eventually leads to more pain. And, it might get us caught up in more problems, especially because we are more vulnerable while grieving, so we may be more impulsive, uninhibited or reckless, and we may have compromised decision-making skills.

The Buddha explains the skillful way to cope with loss is to be mindful of the feelings as they arise and pass away, knowing that they are impermanent.

In order to do that, we first practice mindful awareness of our physical body. We can practice mindful breathing, or slow and mindful walking, or mindful eating. We can practice being fully present in the here and now, being fully aware of our body in positions of sitting, standing or laying down. We can practice noticing each sensory perception that arises, moment by moment, one after the other—including hearing, smelling, tasting, and tactile perceptions such as warmth, pressure, sense of touch, and the body's movements. It's best to do this with eyes closed. All these sensory perceptions arise and then pass away, one after another.

When we have developed a practice of mindfulness of the body, then it's easier to practice being mindful of our emotions. We identify them and accept them as normal experiences rather than resisting them. Without any judgment, notice emotions such as nostalgia, sorrow, self-blame, guilt, anger, fear, anxiety, or jealousy. Notice that they arise and then disappear.

If self-blame or guilt arises, such as a feeling of failure as a parent for somehow not preventing the death of your child, remember that everything happens as a result of an unknown mix of causes (including karma) and conditions. Even if your action or failure to act was a condition that led to the person dying unexpectedly, that person had their own past karma that was the actual cause of dying unexpectedly; you didn't create their karma. Each person is the owner of their own intentional actions (karmas) and receives the effects of them. Torturing yourself with self-blame for an unintentional error or misjudgment on your part distracts your mind with negativity, polluting your mind and hindering your journey to Nirvana. It doesn't undo your failure, but only harms you, like biting your own limbs or whipping yourself. Think of the death as a learning experience for you—perhaps to learn to be more mindful, careful and aware, or to get rid of unnecessary activities in your life. Learn the lesson well from the mistake, resolve not to make such mistakes ever again, and then let it go. To ease your mind, if you feel the need to atone for any neglect or mistake, increase your efforts in Dharma practice and in doing good deeds—making merit—improving your karma. Therapy also might be useful.

While we are suffering the pain of loss, we need to make efforts to take care of our body with compassion, as it may be stressed and weakened by grief. Make sure—and request help as needed—to regularly eat healthy food and take care of cleaning. Exercise daily, even if it's just a little walk or a few yoga stretches. Spend time around people with whom you feel very comfortable, and communicate your needs such as a need for silent companionship.

We should keep reminding ourselves to remain in the present, and not to project our minds to the past with regret and sorrow or to the future with fear and anxiety.

If we find ourselves clinging to hope that in the future when we die, we will be again with our loved one in a heaven-world, we can consider that we have been the wife, husband, parent, child, relative and friend of countless beings whom we dearly loved from our countless past lives.

Of course, it's so difficult not to think of the past, as we miss all the sweetness of our loved one—their good qualities, particular habits and skills, their endearing appearance and words.

But it might make us fear for the future, that we will never experience that delight again, lamenting “Oh! I will never again [feel, have, see, do, enjoy, love, or be] . . . !” Such thinking increases our suffering.

We must understand that it’s not only the presence of the loved one that we miss, but also the pleasant feelings that the loved one evoked in ourselves. We felt happy, appreciated, loved, supported, motivated, and worthy around our loved one. A large part of our grief is experiencing the void of not having those feelings, and the fear that we’ll never have them again.

We have to convince ourselves that with time, we will experience those pleasant feelings again; they arise from within us, so we must learn to evoke those feelings without depending on another particular person.

Consider how not only your feelings but also your identity has been tied to your loved one. Over the years, you have thought, “I am the wife of this wonderful man,” “I am the partner of this perfect woman,” “I am a mother of an adorable child,” “My joy is my lovely dog.” Try to substitute those thoughts with an identity based on something that cannot be lost in this life, such as “I have many good qualities,” “I am a Dharma practitioner,” or “I am a bodhisattva,” or future arahant, or devotee of the Buddha. Eventually with Dharma practice, we come to understand that we have no permanent, unchanging, separate identity or self. But on our path to that understanding, we can work on detaching from our ordinary identity based on who we love, what we like, what we dislike, our career and successes, and so forth, and forming instead an identity that is not limited by time and place and this particular lifetime. Then we won’t feel so lost and worthless without our loved one. The loss of our loved one can be the catalyst for us to form this more wholesome identity.

After becoming a nun, Kisa Gotami realized how fruitless it was to tie her identity with her child, expecting her child to live a long life.

As she meditated on the flames, she observed that only some flare up and others flicker out. Similarly, there are long lives and short lives, and they keep arising and ceasing—birth and death—over and over. So, we can’t assume that our loved ones will live a long and healthy life. The Buddha had taught her that death takes away all living beings but they still have desires and longings. We are stuck in the cycle of samsara—suffering, dying, and being reborn—because we have desires for things and experiences in this world. When we are free of worldly desires and our delusion, we attain Nirvana.

The Buddha then appeared to her and pointed out that it’s better to live a short life—even only for a single day—and reach Nirvana than to endure for a long life on Earth and not experience Nirvana. He made her realize that having a long life is not the goal; having a Dharmic life generating merit as we journey on the path to Nirvana is what makes life valuable.

We can do the best for our deceased loved one and for ourselves by making efforts to be focused on the present, here and now, moment to moment—practicing mindfulness—and offering our merits to our loved one and to all sentient beings.

Patācārā's Despair

Patācārā was the daughter of a very wealthy merchant and she was exceedingly beautiful. When she was about sixteen years old, her parents gave her an apartment to live in on the top floor—the seventh story—of their palace. Her parents kept her there, surrounded by guards. Her parents had arranged a marriage for her to a young man who was of their same socioeconomic status, and set the wedding day. Yet, despite her parents' efforts to protect her from getting romantically involved with any other man, she fell in love with a young man who was her attendant.

When the arranged wedding day was close, Patācārā said to her attendant, "My parents tell me that they intend to give me in marriage to a young man of this certain family. Now you know very well that when I am once inside my husband's house, you may bring me presents and come to see me all you like, but you will never, ever get in. Therefore, if you really love me, don't delay an instant, but find some way or other of getting me out of this place."

He replied, "Yes, my love, this is what I will do: tomorrow, early in the morning, I will go to the city gate and wait for you at this certain spot; you manage, somehow or other, to get out of this place and meet me there."

The next day, he went to the appointed place and waited. Patācārā got up very early in the morning, put on some dirty clothes, messed up her hair so it looked disheveled, and smeared her body with red powder. Then, in order to outwit her guards, she took a waterpot in her hand, surrounded herself with servant girls, and went out as if she intended to get some water from outside. Escaping from the palace, she went to the appointed place and met her lover.

Together they went some distance away to a village where they found a small house to stay in. Her attendant, now her husband, tilled the soil around it to grow rice and vegetables, and gathered firewood and leaves in the forest. Patācārā brought water from a nearby stream for the household needs, and pounded the rice hulls to extract the rice grains. She did all the cooking and other household duties, as she had no longer had servants to do the work.

After some time, she became pregnant. When the time came to deliver the baby, she said to her husband:

"Here I have no one to help me. But a mother and father always have a soft spot in their heart for their child. Therefore, take me home to them, that I may give birth to my child in their house."

Her husband refused her request, saying, "My dear wife, what are you saying? If your mother and father were to see me, they would beat me up. I cannot go."

She begged him again and again, but he would not agree to take her there.

One day, when her husband was away in the forest, she told her neighbors to tell her husband, if he asks them where she is, that she has gone home to her parents. Then she left, walking toward her parents' palace. When her husband found she had left, and the neighbors told her where she had gone, he went out to find her. When he saw her, he caught up with her and begged her to return with him. But she refused and he was unable to persuade her.

After they had walked some distance together, she felt birth pains coming, and gave birth laying on the ground, tossing around with pain. When her son was born, she said to her husband, "What I set out to go home for is over." So, the couple with their baby returned to their house.

When their son was a toddler, Patācārā became pregnant again. When she felt it was almost time to deliver the baby, she again requested her husband to take her to her parents' home for the birth, and he gave the same answer as before. So, holding her son on her hip, she started walking towards her parents' palace. As before, her husband caught up with her and asked her to return with him, and she refused. As they continued walking, a huge storm arose. It was not the season for such a large storm. The sky was full of lightning flashes and loud thunder, and rain poured incessantly. Patācārā felt birth pains, and she asked her husband to find some place out of the rain for her to give birth. Her husband, who happened to have an axe with him, looked for some materials to make a shelter for her. Seeing some brushwood growing on top of an ant-hill, he started chopping the brushwood. Suddenly, a poisonous snake emerged from the ant-hill and bit him. He felt as if fire was burning through his body, and right on the spot, he fell down and died.

Patācārā, suffering intense pain, was watching for her husband to return, but there was no sign of him. Finally, she gave birth to a second son. The newborn baby as well as the toddler couldn't stand the cold wind and rain, so they both screamed at the top of their lungs. Patācārā hugged them tightly and crouched on the ground with her hands and knees pressed together. She stayed in that position all night with her two children. Her whole body looked as if there was no blood left in it, like a withered leaf.

When the sun began to rise, she took her newborn son, and placed him on her hip. She gave her toddler son one of her fingers to hold, saying,

"Come, dear child, your father has left us."

She started walking along the path where she had last seen her husband. When she came to the ant-hill, there lying on top of it she saw her dead husband.

"All because of me, my husband has died on the road," she wailed, and as she grieved, she continued her journey with her two children.

She came to a stream, which normally was fairly easy to wade across. But it was much deeper than usual because of the heavy rain the past night. In some places, it was now waist deep.

She was too weak to carry both of her children across the stream, so she left the older boy on the bank of the stream while she carried the newborn across it. She spread some soft leaves on the ground and laid her baby on it. She knew that she had to leave him to return to her other son and carry him across. It was difficult for her to leave the little one. When she started to cross back over the stream, again and again she turned around to look at him. She had barely reached midstream with a huge hawk saw the child. Mistaking the baby for a piece of meat, the hawk swooped down from the sky and dove toward him. Patācārā raised both her hands and screamed loudly, “Go away! Go away!” But the hawk grabbed the baby in its talons and flew up into the air with him.

The toddler, still waiting on the bank of the stream, saw his mother stop in the middle of the stream, raise her hands and scream loudly. He didn’t hear what she was saying. He thought, “She is calling me.” He ran toward her but fell in the water. Then the current of the stream swept him away! His mother desperately waded toward him as fast as she could but was unable to move fast enough to save him.

She wailed in despair, “One of my sons has been carried off by a hawk, the other swept away by the water; by the roadside my husband lies dead!” With this thought repeating over and over in her mind, and wailing and crying, she could do nothing but walk home to her parents.

Along the way, she met a man coming from Savatthi, the city where her parents lived. She asked him whether he knew the wealthy merchant’s family that lived on the street where she grew up. He replied,

“Yes, my good woman, I know them. But please don’t ask me about that family. Ask me about any other family you know.”

Patācārā said, “Sir, I have no reason to ask about any other family. This is the only family I wish to ask about.”

The man responded, “You give me no opportunity to avoid telling you. Did you observe that it rained all last night?”

She replied, “Indeed I did, sir. In fact, I am the only person the rain fell on all night long. How it came to rain on me, I will tell you later. But just tell me what has happened to the family of this wealthy merchant, and I will ask you no further questions.”

The man said, “Last night, the storm overturned that house, and it fell on the merchant and his wife and son, and they perished, all three, and their neighbors and family are even now cremating their bodies. Look there, you can see the smoke now.”

Instantly she went insane. Her clothing fell off from her body, but she wasn’t aware of it. She didn’t know that she was naked. She wandered around naked, weeping and wailing and lamenting,

“Both my sons are dead, my husband on the road lies dead; and my mother, father and brother are being cremated!” Overwhelmed by despair, she could think of nothing else.

People who saw her didn’t want her anywhere near them so they yelled and tried to make her go away. Some threw garbage at her, others showered dust on her head, and others pelted her with clods of dirt.

At this time the Buddha was staying at the Jetavana monastery. As he sat there among his disciples teaching the Dharma, he saw Patācārā approaching in the distance. He recognized her as one who for many cycles of time had developed the Perfections—generosity, morality, patience, perseverance, concentration and wisdom—and as one who had made an earnest wish and attained it. In her distant past life during the time of a previous Buddha named Padumuttara, she had seen the Buddha Padumuttara give praise and recognition to an elder nun for her expertise in the Vinaya (rules of conduct for monastics). It seemed that the Buddha Padumuttara was honoring her with great esteem. So, Patācārā in that former lifetime resolved and made an earnest wish, an aspiration, “May I also obtain from a Buddha like you pre-eminence among nuns knowledgeable in the Vinaya.”

The Buddha Padumuttara, extending his consciousness into the future and perceiving that her aspiration would be fulfilled, made the following prophecy:

“In the time of a Buddha to be known as Gotama, this woman will bear the name Patācārā, and will attain pre-eminence among nuns knowledgeable in the Vinaya.”

So, when Gotama Buddha saw Patācārā approaching in the distance, he said, “There is none other who can be a refuge to this woman, but only I.”

He caused her to come close to the monastery. The moment his disciples saw her, they yelled, “Do not let that crazy woman come here!”

But the Buddha said, “Do not hinder her.”

When she came near, he said to her, “Sister, regain your mindfulness!”

Instantly, through the power of the Buddha, she regained awareness and control of her mind. She noticed that her clothing had fallen off of her body, and, feeling ashamed, she suddenly crouched on the ground.

A man threw her his cloak. She put it on, and approaching the Buddha, she bowed to him and said,

“Venerable sir, be my refuge, be my support. One of my sons has been carried off by a hawk, the other swept away by the water, by the roadside my husband lies dead; my father’s house

has been wrecked by the wind, and in it have perished by mother and father and my only brother, and even now their bodies are being cremated.”

The Buddha listened to what she had to say and replied, “Patācārā, have no fear. You have come to one who can protect and guide you, who is able to be your shelter, your refuge. What you have said is true. One of your sons has been carried off by a hawk, the other swept away by the water; by the roadside your husband lies dead; your father’s house has been wrecked by the wind, and in it have perished your mother and father and brother. But just as today, so also all through this round of existences, you have wept over the loss of sons and others dear to you, and the amount of all those tears is voluminous.”

Then he said the following stanza:

But little water do the four oceans contain,
Compared with all the tears that man has shed,
By sorrow smitten and by suffering distraught.
Woman, why heedless do you still remain?

In this way, the Buddha taught about the cycle of existences, the countless lives we have had without any conceivable beginning. As he spoke, the grief which pervaded her body became less intense. Perceiving that her grief had become less intense, he continued his teaching as follows:

“Patācārā, to one who is on his way to the world beyond, neither sons nor other relatives can ever be a shelter or a refuge. How much less can you expect them to be such to you in this present life! One who is wise should purify his conduct, and so make clear the path that leads to Nirvana.”

He spoke the following stanzas:

No sons are there for shelter,
Nor father, nor related folk;
For one seized by the End-Maker,
Kinsmen provide no shelter.

Having well understood this fact,
The wise man well restrained by virtues
Quickly indeed should clear
The path going to Nirvana.

Dhammapada 288-289.

At the conclusion of the discourse, Patācārā realized the uncertainty and futility of existence in samsara, remaining in the cycle of rebirths. She attained the first level of enlightenment, that

of stream-entry, and her mind was purified. Many others hearing the discourse also attained levels of enlightenment. Patācārā requested from the Buddha to be ordained as a nun. The Buddha sent her to the nuns and directed that she be ordained. She then became a nun.

One day, she was cleaning her feet, pouring water from a pot on her feet. As she poured the water for the first time, it flowed only a short distance and disappeared. When she poured water for a second time, the water went a little farther. When she poured water for the third time, it went even farther. As she looked at the flow and disappearance of water poured out three times, she perceived clearly the three stages in the life of beings.

The Buddha, seeing her from the monastery through his supernormal powers, sent forth his radiance and appeared as if he was standing face to face with her. He confirmed to her, “Patācārā, you are now on the right path, and you now have the true perception of the component things (khandhas or skandhas) of life. Better than not seeing the rise and fall of the five component things—and their impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and insubstantiality—while living for a hundred years, is seeing the rise and fall for even a day, or a moment.”

At the conclusion of his teaching, Patācārā became an arahant. Later, the Buddha placed Patācārā in the position of being foremost of the nuns who kept the Vinaya in mind, granting her wish from her past life.

Dharma Discussion – Depression and Despair:

Patācārā’s whole world fell apart; she had no one to support her or provide for her basic needs. Her story is instructive for any situation when we fall into a depression or despair in response to an event we experienced, observed or heard about.

We might, like Patācārā, ruminate over the event, with repetitive negative thoughts playing in an endless loop in our head, dwelling on the situation. This is a typical symptom of depression. She only snapped out of it when the Buddha intervened.

We don’t have a living Buddha to help us snap out of despair, so what can we do to help ourselves out of it, to reduce the pain, to not be overwhelmed by it?

The Buddha’s teachings—the Dharma—as explained by living advanced Dharma practitioners (including monks and nuns)—the Sangha—can guide and heal us, and relieve us of suffering. The Buddha’s teachings in this story as well as other Buddhist teachings and practices can be applied when we experience upsetting events to buffer the pain and help us cope better. If we start practicing them now, then it’s easier to remember and practice whenever we are in crisis.

One such practice is developing a practice of mindfulness and/or meditation.

They are techniques that bring us closer to our best self, our inner calmness and wisdom, our awakened pure mind, our future enlightened self, our future arahant self, our Buddha Nature—whichever term you prefer. They give us not only during our practice a temporary respite from mental pain, but also afterward, some ongoing insulation against the worst of the pain.

If you haven't yet started practicing mindfulness or meditation, or if you feel too overwhelmed to do your usual practice, then go outside and find a small living object in nature such as a flower, a leaf, a plant, a tree, an insect, or a small animal. Look at its appearance in detail, noticing its colors, textures, symmetry and other features. Enjoy its simple beauty. Contemplate how it survives, its strength, its vulnerability, how it lives in different seasons, and its interdependence with its environment. This exercise can create a calm, pleasant train of thought and sense of childlike wonder. Be aware of any sad or unpleasant thoughts, and then bring your mind back to neutral or uplifting thoughts about the object. Experiment with different methods of mindfulness such as walking meditation, mindful yoga, and progressive muscle relaxation, and see what works best for you.

Another practice is developing equanimity, which means even-mindedness, or freedom from extreme attachment, desire, aversion, anger or hatred. But it's not apathy or anhedonia. Equanimity reduces neuroticism, enhances emotional stability, calms our mental volatility. How do we develop equanimity? There are many ways.

First, we can try to see the bigger picture.

The Buddha taught Patācārā about the suffering of samsara to help put her despair into perspective. He pointed out that we have suffered terribly, over and over, in countless past lives. All of us have. It's the nature of samsara, the cycle of birth and death.

The First Noble Truth that he taught is that life—all life—is full of suffering, which includes discomfort, disappointment, dissatisfaction, frustration, fear, anxiety, stress, and so on. We work so hard for success and a pleasant life, and then we experience a devastating loss, disappointment, crisis, abuse or tragedy, or something horrible happens.

We perceive it as a catastrophe, disaster or failure; maybe we feel it is so unfair, or we see ourselves as an innocent victim. Painful emotions arise.

These perceptions and feelings are based on our worldview, our conditioning that has been shaped by our family and social norms.

But the Buddha guides us to see things in a wider perspective.

He taught that terrible events that we experience are a result of our own negative karmas (actions) from our past, including from past lives. This includes our collective karmas, which are harmful actions done as a group or culture. Our negative karmas can only be healed and resolved by experiencing their uncomfortable results.

So, sometimes, the way forward is through the dark.

We can reframe our terrible experience as an inevitable result of past karma, and now we have successfully completed it, so it's over and done. We can celebrate that we've made our way out of the dark patch.

We can seek justice, in appropriate circumstances, against those who have done harm, such as reporting wrongdoing, engaging in activism, and taking legal action. But as we work on healing ourselves and recovering, we avoid holding onto hatred, which harms us even more, and in addition, perpetuates a cycle of hatred and violence.

Second, we can try to be more flexible and open to changes.

We generally expect things to be okay, to proceed according to plan. Otherwise, we would be so anxious, worrying about all the ways things could go wrong. But when our expectations are too strong, when we don't even consider alternatives, we get very upset when things turn out differently.

Instead, we should try to loosen expectations, be open-minded and be aware that everything is always changing, so we can think clearly, be flexible, and be prepared to adapt to different situations. We can remember to loosen our expectations by thinking, "anything can happen to anyone at any time, favorably or unfavorably."

When things do go wrong, regardless of how bleak circumstances might seem, again, remember that things are always changing. The Buddha taught that we create the causes and conditions for good in our own future and in the world by our good actions, so we are not helpless or hopeless.

When we dwell on comparing our life after a tragedy with life before, we prolong the pain. When you awaken in the morning, imagine you are born anew into this world as it is with all its problems, similar to being born in a war zone. Accept it, even embrace it, as a new challenge, an unexpected adventure, your new normal. Prepare yourself for whatever tasks and challenges that you can handle for that day, and feel proud of having the strength to do it! And, notice and fully enjoy each little pleasant thing that arises, and feel gratitude for it. We don't have to live a gloomy life; we adjust our expectations and attitude so that we can more effectively build up from where we are to a better future instead of being dragged down by clinging to a past which no longer exists.

Third, we can "own" our adverse experiences rather than feeling like a victim.

Imagine, hypothetically, that before you were born, you chose to have this terrible experience in this life, because it would benefit you by burning off a lot of your past negative karmas, you knew you were strong enough to take on the challenge, you would have the support of the Dharma, and you knew it was just a temporary role to play, like a great actor takes on a very difficult and dramatic role in a film, knowing he will benefit by making a lot of money from it. What if, like a playwright, you had planned your whole life, with its problems and tragedies, just as it is? What if you are just an actor in your own play?

This is not so far-fetched, because when we're old, we look back on the disasters, crises and adverse circumstances of our life and we see how we learned, developed good qualities, and grew wiser from them. And we can better relate to, warn and teach other people from our experiences. So, many of us don't really regret them.

Indeed, science confirms that challenges and difficulties are exactly what develop our abilities to cope, adjust and learn. They actually increase neuroplasticity in our brains. Plus, science confirms that we derive satisfaction from overcoming obstacles.

Fourth, terrible situations can bring us, like Patācārā, to a wonderful turning point in our lives—a powerful motivation to practice the Dharma, the way to end suffering.

We might need a shockingly strong push off our path of mediocrity, to see and feel first-hand how it leads to extreme suffering, in order to walk the path toward enlightenment.

The Buddha induced Patācārā's motivation by asking why she still remains heedless (unaware, lost in ignorance) after so much sorrow and suffering. He encouraged her (and us) to make clear the path to Nirvana. Rather than being overcome by despair, or trying to resist it with anger, denial, aggression, recklessness and so forth, we can use despair as a catalyst for positive change—a springboard to practice, or deepen our practice, of the Dharma. Not only Patācārā but many other persons became enlightened after they experienced despair as their motivation to turn to the Dharma for relief.

The Buddha pointed out the futility of depending on family, our ordinary refuge, to shelter us from the ravages and suffering of life. The ordinary purposes of life—career, family, wealth, fame, popularity and other worldly attainments—are subject to loss, change, disappointment, and disappearance and never give us complete fulfillment.

Through our despair we can find the highest purpose in life—choosing to follow the path of Dharma—which gives us deep satisfaction and wisdom, and eventually the ultimate fulfillment of becoming enlightened.

Every virtue we develop, every good act we do, every bit of wisdom we gain, add to our store of merit and wisdom, which can never be lost, and which results in enlightenment.

Another way to develop equanimity is contemplating the Buddha's teaching that all things that we perceive in the world—all phenomena—are arising in our mind of the five components, called khandhas: form, feeling, perception, mental formations (or volition), and consciousness. That is, our five senses and/or our mind are stimulated and become conscious of a form (or object); we feel it as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral; we perceive or identify what the form (or object) is; and our mind might react, respond, think about it, or initiate physical action. Over time, as we become more and more aware that all of our experiences in the world are made up of these five components—our life is a constant process of these five components, a flow of functions, ongoing projections of the mind—then we develop equanimity. We develop a deeper insight into the impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and insubstantiality (anicca, dukkha and anatta) of everything that exists in the world. That is, nothing lasts forever, nothing fulfills us forever, and nothing has an unchanging, permanent independent identity or essence.

Or, we can contemplate interdependence—that countless causes and conditions bring about the objects, actions, circumstances and events around us. When Patācārā poured water on her feet and one stream flowed shorter and another flowed longer than another, she perceived clearly the three stages in the life of beings. Perhaps she contemplated that, just as natural causes and conditions determine a short, medium or a long stream of water, natural causes and conditions determine death at a young age, middle age or old age.

Seeing everything as a result of causes and conditions reduces habits of blaming, assuming unfairness or feeling cursed, which inflame our anger.

The story didn't describe in detail Patācārā's insight when she poured the water on her feet. Given that the Buddha confirmed that she had the true perception of the component things of life, that he mentioned the impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and insubstantiality of component things, that he appeared to her in a non-physical form, and that she then became an arahant, the insight she had must have been powerful. It may be that as she observed the

water, she had an insight into ultimate reality, non-duality, that everything we experience is merely appearance in our mind, or illusion. One can begin to understand this by remembering that everything is made up of atoms which are mostly empty space, and that we comprehend the world around us by our mind interpreting patterns of light sensed with our eyes as objects with which we are familiar. Perhaps she had insight that just as one mass of water appears as separate streams of water, water is one and streams are many, also, Emptiness (shunyata) is one and appearances are many. The insight of Emptiness—ultimate reality, non-duality—not only results in equanimity, but also a feeling of bliss.

Another Dharma teaching we can practice is compassion.

Compassion means we understand another's pain and wish to relieve them from it.

We can truly feel compassion for others only when we ourselves have experienced pain similar to theirs.

It might not be easy to feel compassion for others when we're feeling upset or agitated, or when our own needs and desires aren't being met after a traumatic event.

So, we can start with feeling compassion for our own body.

When we're experiencing depression or despair, our body is stressed and suffering but we might tend to neglect it. Patācārā too ignored her body when depressed. Regardless of how you feel toward your body, try to feel compassion for it, like you would your child or pet. Take special care of it with nutritious food, hydration, rest, fresh air, exercise, and so on.

After such an event, we might be preoccupied with thoughts about ourselves—doubts, fears, regret, and so on.

Maybe due to our experiences, we have lost trust or respect for some people, and our thoughts dwell on them.

We might feel very alone in our suffering. We might feel abandoned.

In all of these situations, it helps to shift our focus onto others who are suffering like we are, such as people or even animals who have been similarly harmed or traumatized.

You can look at videos, such as on YouTube, or read stories about people who are going through extreme struggles, hardships or tragedies. Although this might seem depressing, it can reduce your self-absorption and painful thoughts and help you develop compassion. It might inspire you and provide ideas of how to overcome difficulties.

Or, we can focus on people who are vulnerable to the same kind of terrible experience we had. Feeling a connection with others with hardship or vulnerability, we experience suffering as a collective rather than as an individual. We open our heart to their suffering or vulnerability and feel compassion for them.

We might be feeling revulsion or resentment toward those who caused harm, or who are responsible for the upsetting event. These are stressful, painful thoughts.

We can ease our stress by practicing the following radical compassion toward these people: try to see them as ignorant or mentally confused because they're deeply afflicted with negative emotions (such as hatred, greed, jealousy, vengeance, narcissism, aggression) and maybe even demonic influences. We don't know the causes and conditions underlying their afflictions.

Even if they don't show it, these emotions make them miserable and generate negative karmas for which they will have to suffer in the future.

Seeing that they are suffering, we transform our hatred into compassion.

What else can we do to practice compassion? How can we relieve others' suffering?

You can do prayers, chanting, send mental wishes for others' well-being, or practice loving-kindness meditation. Or pray or wish that no one else suffer like you are suffering.

You can pray that those who have hurt you find a way to the Dharma, peace and happiness, and never harm anyone again.

You can smile and say friendly greetings to people you ordinarily ignore.

You can try to listen more carefully and compassionately and express appreciation in conversations.

You can try to be more considerate of others, more understanding of their needs.

You can look for opportunities to help others wherever you are.

All of these methods generate merit, improving our karma and therefore our future.

What if we don't genuinely feel kindness? What if we don't really care that much?

The more we practice in the ways listed above, then the more we start to really care for others, and we start to feel uplifted and joyful.

At first, we may have to "fake it until we make it," training our mind by saying prayers and good wishes aloud while concentrating on the meaning of what we are saying. Visualize sending out light or good energy. Imagine that others become relaxed and smile, feeling relieved of their suffering. Over time, we develop genuine feelings of kindness and compassion.

What if we doubt that our wishes are going to make any difference?

Each compassionate thought, kind action or word, or good wish for another person seems small and insignificant, but these merits add up. As we accumulate more merits, they collect like drops of water form a stream, and over time as we form a habit of making merits, they become a mighty river, giving us more and more benefits. Our merits join the ocean of the merits of all beings, which is extremely powerful in changing the world.

Not only that, but when we generate merits, we feel good about ourselves, in alignment with our life's highest purpose. When we have an uplifted attitude, we uplift others around us merely by our presence.

We also put compassion into action with activism, joining an organization that advocates for causes you are interested in, or finding volunteer work that particularly interests you.

Like Patācārā when she became a nun, we might find new friends, a new "family" when we spend time in these new activities.

The Snake's Master (Sappadāsa)

A young man from a very wealthy, highly respected family heard the Buddha teach the Dharma, and he was so inspired by it that he decided to become one of the Buddha's monks. So, he was ordained and joined the Sangha of monks.

After he spent some time living as a monk, he was not at all content. He felt extremely unhappy as a monk. He thought,

"The life of a layman is not suited to a youth of status like me. But even death would be preferable to remaining a monk."

He knew he couldn't just return to his family after having left them to become a monk. And he couldn't just go out and find some work to do to support himself, because everyone knew he was from a high-caste family and wouldn't allow him to work as a laborer or in any other lower caste job. So, he spent his days considering ways of killing himself.

One day, very early in the morning, the monks went to the monastery after breakfast and saw a snake. They wanted to prevent the snake from biting anyone, but they wanted to act with compassion and not harm it in any way. Some of the monks very carefully caught the snake and put it into a jar. They closed the jar, trapping the snake inside, and carried it out of the monastery so they could let it live freely away from the monks.

The unhappy monk, after eating his breakfast, saw the group of monks holding the jar, and asked, "What do you have there, friend?"

They responded, "A snake, friend."

He asked, "What are you going to do with it?"

They answered, "Throw it away."

The unhappy monk thought to himself, "The snake is poisonous. I can commit suicide by letting the snake bite me."

So, he said to the other monks, "Let me take it; I'll throw it away."

He took the jar from their hands, sat down in a certain place, and tried to make the snake bite him. But the snake refused to bite him. He put his hand in the jar and waved it this way and that. Then he opened the snake's mouth and stuck his finger in. But the snake still refused to bite him. He said to himself, "It's not a poisonous snake, it's just a house-snake." He threw it away and returned to the monastery.

The other monks asked him, "Did you throw away the snake, friend?"

He said, "Friends, that was not a poisonous snake. It was only a house snake."

One of the other monks responded, "Friend, that was a poisonous snake. It spread its hood wide, hissed at us, and gave us a lot of trouble when we were trying to catch him. Why do you say it's only a house snake?"

The unhappy monk responded, "Friends, I tried to make it bite me and even stuck my finger into its mouth, but I couldn't make it bite."

When the other monks heard him say that, they didn't know how to respond. They were silent.

The unhappy monk served as the barber at the monastery. One day, he went to the monastery with two or three razors, and he put one razor on the floor. Then he proceeded to shave the hair of the monks with the other razors. When he picked up the razor from the floor, the thought occurred to him, "I will cut my throat with this razor and put myself out."

He went to a certain tree, leaned his neck against a branch, and held the blade of the razor to his windpipe. Remaining in this position, he reflected on his conduct from the time he was ordained as a monk. He perceived that his conduct was flawless, like the spotless shining moon or a cluster of transparent jewels. As he examined his conduct, a thrill of joy suffused his whole body. He subdued the feeling of joy and developed insight. At that moment, he became enlightened as an arahant, with analytical knowledge. He no longer wanted to die. He took his razor in his hand and entered the monastery enclosure.

The monks asked him, "Where did you go, friend?"

He responded, "Friends, I went out thinking to myself, 'I will cut my windpipe with this razor and put myself out.'"

One of the monks asked, "How did you escape death?"

The formerly unhappy monk responded, "I can no longer commit suicide. For I said to myself, 'With this razor I will sever my windpipe.' But instead of doing so, I severed the taints with the razor of knowledge."

The monks didn't believe he had eliminated his taints—the craving for pleasure, the craving for existence (to remain a separate individual), and ignorance of the true nature of things. They said to themselves, "This monk speaks falsely; he says what is untrue." They went to the Buddha and reported the matter to him.

A monk said, "Reverend sir, why didn't that snake bite him?"

The Buddha answered, “Monks, the simple fact is that the snake was his servant in a past life, his third previous existence, and therefore did not dare to bite the body of his own master.”

Thereafter, the monk was called Sappadāsa, which means “having a snake his servant.”

A monk asked a further question: “Reverend sir, this monk says that he became an arahant as he stood with the blade of his razor pressed against his windpipe. Is it possible to become an arahant in such a short period of time?”

The Buddha replied, “Yes, monks, a monk who strives with all his might may become an arahant while raising his foot, while setting his foot on the ground, or even before his foot touches the ground. For it is better for a man who strives with all his might to live but a single instant than for an idle man to live a hundred years.”

He spoke the following stanza:

Though one should live a hundred years
Lazy, of little effort,
Yet better is life for a single day
For one who makes a steady effort.

Dhammapada 112

Dharma Discussion – Suicidal Thoughts:

We don’t know for certain why Sappadāsa was so unhappy as a monk. For some reason, he felt that he would rather die than continue living as a monk, yet he couldn’t give up the monk’s life and return to his family or start a job. His suicidal thoughts arose from being in a hopeless situation.

This story is instructive for all kinds of situations involving suicidal or self-harming thoughts. Whether you are thinking there’s no point in living, feeling worthless, or you are actively considering suicide, have attempted suicide or self-harmed (such as cutting your skin), or you have passive suicidal thoughts (such as no longer having motivation to live, not wanting to wake up, hoping to die in an accident or by recklessness, wishing you never were born, or thinking everyone would be better off without you), the Buddha’s teachings can help. These teachings also can help you advise another person who has these kinds of thoughts. In any case, it is crucial that you or the person you are advising immediately seek treatment with a professional therapist, or at least tell someone you can confide in, even if the suicidal thoughts have subsided lately. In an acute situation, contact a helpline. This discussion offers methods in addition to professional treatment to address suicidal and self-harming thoughts.

Sappadāsa induced a feeling of joy and cured himself of his suicidal thoughts by reflecting on his perfect conduct since he was a monk. It wasn't a feeling of personal pride, which would have hindered insight and enlightenment. Simply reflecting on his own virtuous conduct—with humility and gratitude to the Buddha, we might assume—generated positive thoughts that eliminated suicidal thoughts.

The Buddha's teaching in this story confirms that making effort practicing the Dharma even for a very short period of time is of great value, that is, makes great merit leading to enlightenment.

And it makes life worthwhile again—or more than worthwhile—a great adventure, experiment, or journey toward ultimate happiness.

It isn't dependent upon having had perfect behavior or a huge accumulation of merit like the monk Sappadāsa. It doesn't matter at all what wrongdoing we have done before. (You can read the story of the serial murderer Angulimāla for encouragement on this point.)

You can simply create a moment of perfect Dharmic behavior in this moment.

Contemplate that regardless of negative behavior you have engaged in, right now you are engaging in perfect conduct.

And create a "Moment of Merit" by thinking: "Right now, I am not doing anything that could harm myself or any other being. Right now, I think of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha," also known as the Three Jewels or Triple Gem.

Next, focus on the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, or just one of them, for a moment.

Focus on the Buddha by gazing at your favorite Buddha painting or statue, or your own mental image of Buddha. Close your eyes and see the image of the Buddha in your mind. Imagine that he looks at you very lovingly, with more love than you've ever experienced. He totally forgives you and understands you. His blessings are with you always, protecting and guiding you.

Focus on the Dharma by considering that you have a way out of misery with the Buddha's teachings. He gave us so many teachings and techniques, recorded in the Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana scriptures, which are like timeless prescriptions for the many different types of people that exist, to heal our minds and lead us out of suffering and into peace and happiness.

Focus on the Sangha by contemplating that there are great monks and Dharma practitioners living today who have attained some level of enlightenment, and there are millions of others who are developing lovingkindness, compassion and other good qualities as they proceed on the path to enlightenment. Visualize them like millions of extremely bright points of light all around the Earth, shining out into the darkness of this degenerate age. Visualize that you are one of those lights.

You can also practice a "Moment of Mindfulness," keeping moment-by-moment full sensory awareness on your breathing or on ambient sounds around you with eyes closed, or on walking (i.e. walking meditation), eating, or sipping a beverage. This sharpens and trains your mind so you eventually can attain advanced states of meditation that are extremely blissful. Whenever you have a few seconds to practice mindfulness, you add to your accumulation of merit.

We can do these Moments of Merit and Moments of Mindfulness again and again, generating more and more merit, like accumulating money in a savings account. This merit cannot disappear; it accumulates over lifetimes and gives us good fortune and happiness, and in addition, leads us toward enlightenment.

These are on-the-spot techniques to avoid negative or suicidal thoughts and to build up our reserves of good fortune. But we also need to understand these thoughts better so we can find a way to redirect them from being destructive to being constructive.

When we are hoping to die, what do we really want to accomplish?

We expect that if we destroy the body, the brain dies so the pain in our mind dies.

But how do we know that is true?

If we destroy our body, we don't destroy our pain. The Buddha teaches that after death (unless we have attained nirvana) there is rebirth in one of the six realms of samsara: as a human, animal, ghost, as a deva in a god-realm, as an asura in the jealous-god realm, or in a hell-realm. Regardless of which realm we are born into, we experience suffering to some degree. Even devas in the god-realms must be reborn to suffer human life on Earth again. There is no guarantee that in the next human life we will have access to the Dharma or have a healthy body or environment. Also, when rebirth occurs, we don't get a clean-slate new mind. There are certain energies that transmit from one birth to the next, including our karmas and strong mental habits. Whatever bad habits and negative karmas we had will carry to the next life as the cause of more suffering. In order to escape pain and suffering, while we are in human form we need to heal ourselves, accumulate merit, develop our good qualities, and overcome habits that hinder our path to enlightenment. We have the advantage now of having a human life with access to the Dharma to work on this. And if our circumstances are very difficult, we "burn off" more negative karmas in this life, propelling us forward on the path to happiness.

To end our pain is what the Buddha sought to accomplish when he left home and stayed in the forest for six years. He wanted to find the way to end suffering for everyone, and he found it—the attainment of nirvana.

Our wish to die is really our desire for the actual end of our suffering, which is nirvana.

So, we can reframe our suicidal thoughts as the longing for nirvana.

Whenever you notice you are having a wish to die, immediately transform it into a wish for nirvana. And remember that you are on the path to nirvana—all you have to do is take another step to get closer.

To take a step on the path, you can simply take a Moment of Merit or Moment of Mindfulness.

But we want a shortcut. The path to nirvana seems endless; it takes lifetimes to reach nirvana, so we feel exhausted and hopeless and don't want to make the effort.

We need encouragement—we want to feel happiness right now. How can we do that?

We're used to the typical "worldly" ways of seeking happiness—such as career success, social life, family life, getting and experiencing new things, entertainment, amusement, praise and attention from others.

When we try to make ourselves happy in these ways, we find they are temporary, short-lived or insufficient. One day we succeed, on another we fail; one day all goes well, on another things go horribly wrong; one day we're elated, another day we're utterly defeated. There's always some degree of dissatisfaction, including knowing that the feeling of joy is going to end at some point.

Plus, many of us don't have a fulfilling romantic relationship, or we feel unloved, abandoned, abused, neglected or lonely, or we doubt we ever will find real love.

We need a way to real happiness that doesn't depend on another person's feelings for us or on the ups and downs, gains and losses, thrills and horrors of "worldly" ways of seeking happiness, where at any time, something can kill our happiness and take away our will to live.

Why are these ways of seeking happiness so unfulfilling and fraught with disaster?

They involve focusing on ourselves, "I," "me" and "my": "I deserve this," "my child should...," "I want to have...," "he doesn't care about me," "she left me."

Naturally when things go wrong, we want to know who was at fault, where we went wrong, what we can do better next time, how we can get a better result.

But in focusing on ourselves, we find reasons to be angry, or we feel we are lacking, which make us suffer mentally.

And when we ruminate over ourselves—harms done to us, our perceived failures, or feeling unworthy, hopeless or overly self-critical—we might start to feel that life is pointless.

We need to get our mind off of ourselves.

We can try some mindful movement, such as yoga, Tai Chi, Qi Gong, or walking in nature, all of which have been shown in studies to improve symptoms of anxiety and depression.

When we nurture something and watch it grow, it symbolizes our own self-nurturing and growth. You can try growing a couple of vegetable or herb plants in pots or start a garden.

You can find new healthy recipes to experiment with, or try a new arts and crafts or sports activity to take your mind off your troubles and feel a sense of accomplishment.

Love is the source of the greatest, most satisfying happiness, and takes our mind off of ourselves. We can learn to experience love without getting too involved with others—without attachment, and without expecting anything in return.

That is, we develop universal lovingkindness. This also builds up our reserves of merit.

We can start by practicing lovingkindness toward animals. For many of us, it's easier to love animals, innocent creatures, than to love people.

When we feed wild birds, observe wildlife, release an insect in our house to outdoors, rescue a living creature in distress, or play with our beloved pet, we're focused on other beings with unconditional love and without any expectation.

We can learn to love people in the same way, with detachment and without expectation of anything at all in return. We can do this in several ways:

1. Generate kind thoughts and well-wishes toward strangers.

For example, when seeing someone who looks stressed, unhappy, or in an unfortunate situation, wish that their problems be solved and that they feel happy and peaceful.

Whenever it's appropriate to greet or thank someone, speak with genuine heartfelt appreciation, while mentally wishing them well.

Express appreciation of someone's accomplishment or creation.

Make kind, appreciative comments online.

2. Try to be aware of how you can help, even in small ways, everywhere you go. Even simply being considerate in whatever you are doing is a way to spread kindness. Be aware of your surroundings, and you find a plethora of opportunities to assist. For example, at a temple you can offer to volunteer with cleaning, organizing, fixing, constructing or repairing; cooking, serving or other kitchen help; offering help with technology, computers, gardening or landscaping; or photographing and making videos of events.

3. Meditate on Lovingkindness.

Find a lovingkindness meditation technique that you like, and practice it regularly.

When you are feeling very depressed, wish that no one else feel depressed like you do.

Meditate on breathing by visualizing that as you breathe in, you inhale blessings of the Buddha, and as you breathe out, you spread love and happiness in the world.

4. Express kindness to acquaintances, when you feel ready to do so.

For example, visit an elderly or lonely relative, neighbor or friend.

Perhaps send a kind email or text to someone you haven't contacted in a while.

Helping others may be difficult when you feel your own needs aren't being met. It's important to take care of yourself. And don't let anyone abuse your kindness, so keep healthy boundaries and decline to help if it doesn't feel right to you. Don't engage in "people pleasing."

Helping or contacting others may be particularly difficult when they don't respond to you, don't appreciate you, or react negatively. Try not to take it personally; consider that the other person is unreceptive or unappreciative because of their own problems and suffering.

And consider that these are your opportunities to practice and develop detachment, courage, resilience and unconditional lovingkindness and compassion.

Be patient with yourself; it takes time to develop these qualities especially when you are coming from a place of dark and depressive thoughts.

After some time, we can see that seeking our own happiness doesn't lead to true happiness, but seeking others' happiness does.

Other than expressions of lovingkindness, even your general behavior can be an example, support or inspiration to others, and you might not know how much they appreciate it.

For example, being thoughtful, kind, polite and humble; or listening and understanding.

If you like to express humor, or even act silly, you uplift others' mood.

If you're creative, such as with music or art, you enrich or inspire others and perhaps help them feel and process their emotions. If you do a sport activity, you may inspire others to do so.

In your darkest times, you generate deep compassion in others, many of whom are unseen by you.

And those who have similar hardships don't feel so alone when they know of your pain. See yourself as part of the web of life, connected with others and generating love in them and in yourself in ways you can't imagine. This is one way of practicing the Buddha's teaching on Interdependence. You are helping others, improving the world, and creating merit, simply by being yourself.

Be easy on yourself. To support your mental health, avoid being overcommitted, having too many responsibilities and obligations without adequate time to decompress.

Always go to sleep thinking, "I have done something good today," and think of the good things you did. Don't dwell on what you didn't do.

Suicidal thoughts and attempts should be neither a source of shame nor a source of pride, bravado or courage. Instead, they are part of your life journey that can be useful after you have conquered them. From your experiences, you will better understand and have deeper compassion for others who are going through extreme difficulties. The wisdom you will have gained from your experiences can be used to guide and counsel others. Thus, you can later look back on the dark times as having not only burned away your negative karmas but also as having enriched your life.

Also, even while you are experiencing suicidal ideation you can transform it into positive motivation. As mentioned above, suicidal thoughts can be sublimated into longing for the end of suffering, nirvana. Another way to reframe these thoughts is to understand that they are a wish for the deluded self to die and for pure wisdom to arise. In other words, these thoughts can be integrated into the philosophy of eradicating the "self" in the Buddhist sense.

In Buddhist philosophy, the actual source of our pain is our mind clinging to a self—a separate individual identity, the notion of "I," "me" and "mine," or the ego. It's not easy to see that as the source of our pain. We have intense feelings that seem to arise from events outside of ourselves—we are innocent; something out the world is the problem. But, we feel, "I have pain," "this awful thing happened to me," "that which was mine is gone." The events outside are experienced by our self. It's our personal experience—what goes on in our mind in response to the outer world—that gives us pain. An enlightened being can experience the same outer circumstances and not suffer any mental anguish.

From another angle, our pain comes from our loss of connectedness with our own deep wisdom and insight, which is revealed to us over time through practicing the Dharma. We can realize that not only the cells of our body but also our self is constantly changing, like a flowing river is never exactly the same at any two points in time. As we learn, experience, develop, and respond and react to our environment, we are constantly changing. Our mind is a stream of thoughts anchoring us to our body and its environment, and when we stop this stream of conceptual thoughts in meditation, we lose our sense of an individual self and

experience non-duality. Upon enlightenment, we understand that our individual self is only an illusion, a construct to navigate our lifetimes in the different realms of samsara. Therefore, it is that illusion of self, the false self, that idea that we are a permanent, separate, individual self, that we really want to kill.

But while you are here on the Earth, your life is extremely valuable to yourself and to other beings. As described above, you help others in myriad ways even when you don't know it. We are all interdependent. The more people there are who really understand suffering and wish to attain true happiness and nirvana, the more we can help each other attain it. And every day there are millions of people around the world sending lovingkindness and well-wishes to all sentient beings including you, praying that you swiftly attain nirvana.

Great-Wealth the Millionaire's Son

A very wealthy couple in the time of the Buddha lived in a household worth 800 million coins and had a son, who was later called Great-Wealth. The couple thought to themselves, "We have a vast store of wealth in our house, and there is no need for our son to do anything else than enjoy himself according to his own good pleasure." So they had teachers instruct their son in singing and playing of musical instruments, and that was all the instruction he received; he had no other education.

Likewise, in the same city, in another household worth 800 million coins, a couple had a daughter. The same thought occurred to her mother and father also, and they hired teachers to instruct her only in singing and dancing.

When the son and daughter of the two households became adults, they were married with the customary ceremonies. After some time, their parents died, so Great-Wealth and his wife lived together in a household worth 1600 million coins.

Great-Wealth always went three times every day to assist the king. One day, a group of roguish men who lived in the city thought to themselves, "If this millionaire's son would only get drunk, it would be a fine thing for us. Let's show him how to get drunk." So, they got some strong alcoholic drink and hid it along with some food in their clothing. Then they seated themselves in a convenient place, watching the path by which Great-Wealth would approach the royal palace. When they saw him approaching, they began to drink the alcohol. They said,

"Live for a hundred years, master millionaire's son! With your help may we be enabled to eat and drink to our heart's content!"

Hearing their words, Great-Wealth asked his assistant, "What are these men drinking?"

The assistant told him it was a certain drink, and Great-Wealth asked, "Does it taste good?"

The assistant said, "Master, in this world of the living there is no kind of drink to be had comparable to this."

"In that case," said Great-Wealth, "I must have some, too."

So he told his assistant to bring him a little bit of what the men were drinking. He drank it, and then told his assistant to bring some more. This he drank, and then asked for more.

After some time, the rogues discovered that Great-Wealth had taken up the habit of drinking alcohol. They flocked around him, and as time went on, the crowd that surrounded Great-Wealth increased. Great-Wealth would spend a hundred or two hundred coins at a time on strong alcoholic drinks. Great-Wealth developed a habit, wherever he would be, of piling up a heap of coins and calling out as he drank,

“Take this coin and fetch me flowers!” or “Take this coin and fetch me perfumes” or “This man is clever at dicing, and this man at dancing, and this man at singing, and this man at playing musical instruments! Give this man a thousand coins, and this man two thousand!”

This is how Great-Wealth spent his money. After a while, he squandered all the 800 million coins that formerly belonged to him.

The roguish men pointed out to him, “Master, your wealth is all spent.”

Great-Wealth responded, “Has my wife no money?”

They responded, “Yes, she has.”

He said, “Well then, fetch me that, too.”

And he spent his wife’s money in precisely the same way. As time went on, he sold his fields and his parks, his gardens and his carriages. He even sold the dishes he used at mealtimes, his bedding, his cloaks and couches. All that belonged to him, he sold and spent on drink and entertainment. In old age, he sold his house the property of his family. The family that bought his house took possession of it and immediately made him leave.

Taking his wife with him, he took up residence near the house-wall of other houses. With a broken bowl in his hand, he went out begging for food. Finally, he began to eat the leavings of other people’s food.

One day Great-Wealth stood at the door of a lodge, receiving leavings of food presented to him by young novice monks. The Buddha saw him and smiled. Venerable Ananda asked him why he smiled. The Buddha said,

“Ananda, just look here at Great-Wealth, the millionaire’s son! In this very city he has squandered 1600 million coins. Now, accompanied by his wife, he is begging for food. If in the prime of life this man had not squandered his wealth but had applied himself to business, he would have become the wealthiest man in the city; and if he had left the worldly life and become a monk, he would have become an arahant and his wife would have attained the third level of enlightenment. If in the middle of his life he had not squandered his wealth but had applied himself to business, he would have become the second wealthiest man in the city; and if he had left the worldly life and become a monk, he would have attained the third level of enlightenment and his wife would have attained the second level. If in the latter years of his life he had not squandered his wealth but had applied himself to business, he would have become the third wealthiest man in the city; and if he had left the worldly life and become a monk, he would have attained the second level of enlightenment and his wife would have attained stream-entry, the first level of enlightenment. But now he has fallen away from the wealth of a layman and he has likewise fallen away from the wealth of an ascetic. He has become like a heron in a dried-up pond.”

He then pronounced the following stanzas:

Having led neither the holy life
Nor riches won while young,
They linger like aged cranes
Around a fished-out pond.

Having led neither the holy life
Nor riches won while young,
They (cranes) lie around like worn-out bows
Sighing about the past.

- Dhammapada 155, 156

Dharma Discussion – Addictions:

The story illustrates that extreme addiction can happen to someone with the highest potential, someone who can become enlightened.

And it illustrates the tragedy of becoming heedless—and the resulting waste of time and money—due to conditions in our environment.

Although substance addiction is a typical cause of heedlessness, as it was for Great-Wealth, other kinds of addictions or distractions can waste our time, create hardships, compromise health and lead us away from a meaningful life. So, this story and discussion are instructive for those of us struggling with any kind of addiction, obsession, or unhealthy habit that hinders us from living up to our potential. For example, addiction to social media, videogames, porn, other screen activities, sex, shopping, or gambling; obsession with physical appearance or exercise; or habits of eating too much sugary or other unhealthy foods. In this discussion, the word “addiction” will be used to encompass all of these.

Great-Wealth’s addiction arose from his upbringing in which he had no goal, direction or purpose in life. In modern times, too, this can make a person vulnerable to addiction. But there are numerous other circumstances that can make us vulnerable to addiction, including experiencing abuse or neglect, mental health issues such as depression or anxiety, painful relationship breakup, job loss, financial problems, loneliness, or death of a loved one, or having a parent, friend, or romantic partner with a substance abuse problem or some type of addiction.

Even if you don’t have an addiction now, or if you only have a tendency toward a harmful habit, just knowing that you are in circumstances that make you vulnerable to an addiction is a good reason to find and use techniques to strengthen yourself.

If you already are experiencing symptoms of addiction, and even if the addiction has become extreme, the Buddha's teaching in this story gives you encouragement that once the addiction is overcome, you can be on track to reach your potential, including attaining enlightenment.

In today's world, it's much easier to become addicted, not only because of the many available temptations but also because of the frequent and intense stress we experience.

We need relief from all the pressures, demands and problems that bombard us, and we want something to look forward to.

So, we're often seeking activities that stimulate dopamine release in our brain's reward system. Enjoying tasty food, music, a new experience, dancing, a sport, exercise, comedy, sex, a game, playing with a pet and creating art all stimulate dopamine release, giving us a feeling of pleasure and causing us to repeat these activities. Even checking or scrolling on our smartphone causes small releases of dopamine.

But some of us seek immediate and reliable relief in bigger doses. Dopamine is stimulated suddenly in large amounts when we use intoxicating substances or engage in other addictive behavior, or even while planning or preparing to do so, motivating us to continue our addiction and eclipsing any desire to do healthier activities that only give us small amounts of dopamine. We crave that dopamine rush or "high" again and again, so the addiction is hard to stop. Simply forcing ourselves to abstain from it, beat it or go "cold turkey" usually doesn't work.

Instead, we need to sublimate our addictive desire—manage our brain's reward system—regulate our dopamine. We can do this by replacing the unhealthy habit with a healthy alternative "high."

Meditation is a healthy alternative in which we can experience dopamine release and bliss—a very tranquil but fully aware state that is deeply satisfying. With practice, one can attain deeper, intense levels of bliss and experience higher perspectives and insights of wisdom.

You can stimulate reward centers in your brain by making meditation enjoyable.

Meditation doesn't mean you force yourself to sit still on the floor, concentrate on something boring and endure it for a set period of time.

Maybe you've had an experience with a meditation teacher who focused on strict discipline and meditation techniques taught in ancient times to monks. However, this might not appeal to those of us who struggle with addiction or are simply trying to find something calming and enjoyable amidst the unpleasantness and stress in our lives.

It's best to explore and try different styles of meditation to find one that's most effective for you.

Some forms of meditation are particularly enjoyable, such as Jhana meditation, with eight levels of bliss. The first four, called the "form jhanas" are described as follows:

- (1) free from thoughts of desire or anything unwholesome, the meditator focuses on and investigates a meditation object, in a state of joy and pleasure;

- (2) the meditator stills the thoughts of investigation and concentrates in a state of joy and pleasure with stillness and unification of mind;
- (3) the joy fades away but the pleasure remains, and the meditator maintains a state of equanimity, mindful with knowing awareness;
- (4) abandoning the desire for pleasure and aversion to pain, the meditator enters a neither-pleasurable-nor-painful state, with completely pure equanimity and mindfulness.

The next four are the “formless jhanas”: infinite space, infinite consciousness, infinite nothingness, and neither-perception nor nonperception.

Another particularly enjoyable type of meditation is Vajrayana deity meditation, which involves visualization and developing increasing levels of bliss.

However, in order to successfully practice these types of meditation, you first need to fully understand their purposes and context and practice basic meditation skills.

For optimal results in any meditation practice, create an inviting meditation space at home and do a relaxing routine before you start meditating. This makes the experience enjoyable and special, something to look forward to in a comforting environment.

First, set up a clean, uncluttered place for meditation with a simple shrine.

It can be very small, just enough room for you to sit comfortably, but that part of the room shouldn't be used for anything else—not used for work, watching TV, sleeping, etc.

Make a comfortable place to sit cross-legged on the floor with as many firm cushions, folded blankets and/or rolled up towels as you need to sit with your back perpendicular to the floor, perhaps with your back against a wall. In the alternative, use a meditation bench or sit on a chair with firm back support so your back is straight.

Place a picture or statue of Buddha and/or a Mahayana or Vajrayana Buddhist deity in front of you on a table, such as a nightstand, dressing table or coffee table dedicated for use as a shrine. If you like, add a candle, incense, and/or an essential oil diffuser and/or flowers.

Next, prepare the body to meditate.

Wear comfortable clean clothing. You may want to first shower or wash your face to feel fresh.

Do some gentle stretches, yoga, Tai Chi or Qi Gong if you have time.

Especially if you feel tense, do progressive relaxation: for each body part, one at a time (face, neck, shoulders arms, hands, torso, legs, feet) clench or tighten muscles as much as you can as you breathe in deeply, and then release and totally relax them as you breathe out completely.

Sit up tall, shoulders relaxed and slightly back, one hand resting on the other palm.

Then, prepare the mind to meditate.

If you like and if you have time, listen to a recording of Buddhist chanting, or whatever music is soothing, healing and calming for you.

Recite prayers, such as a refuge prayer (taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha) and the four Brahmaviharas (also called the Four Immeasurables), and a lovingkindness prayer or Mahayana bodhicitta prayer.

The next step is to close eyes and practice one or more short, simple meditations, for example:

1. *Mindfulness of breathing.* Focus on exactly how it feels to breathe in, and to breathe out. You can focus specifically on the sensations in your nose, or on the movement of your belly, or on the feeling in the chest as it expands and contracts with each natural breath. Try to notice in minute detail each subtle sensory feeling, moment by moment, as the breath passes in and out, and the moment between exhaling and inhaling.
2. *Mentally chant with each breath.*
As you inhale, mentally chant “I breathe in peace” and as you exhale, “I breathe out stress”; or “freshness,” “staleness”; or any other paired words that feel right to you. If you prefer Vajrayana Buddhism, mentally chant “Om” as you inhale, “Ah” in between inhaling and exhaling, and “Hung” (“hoong”) as you exhale.
3. *Visualize a waterfall.* Imagine you are sitting under a small waterfall which flows over your head, shoulders and body--cooling, soothing and cleansing. Imagine it clears all your stress away. Imagine that the waterfall becomes white light flowing down inside your whole body, purifying and healing.
4. *Visualize a favorite peaceful place.* Choose a real or imaginary place such as a beach, forest, lake, mountain, river or field and imagine you are sitting there. Imagine everything you would hear at that place, then everything you would feel (breeze, sun, ground underneath, sand on your feet, water on your toes, etc.) and anything you would smell (ocean, pine, lake water, earth, grass, leaves, flowers, etc.).
5. *Mindfulness of the body.* With eyes closed, notice all the tactile sensations (such as warmth, contact, pressure, weight, clothes, tension, pulse) in one section of your body at a time: face (such as eyelids on eyes, tongue against teeth and palate, lips together, breath in nostrils), neck (weight of head, air passing through windpipe, angle of jaw,) shoulders, arms, hands, fingers, torso, buttocks and upper legs, lower legs, feet, toes.
6. *Healing light in the body.* Visualize a bright white light moves very slowly around inside your body, starting at the heart and stopping at various points, soothing, purifying and healing each part, and then returning to the heart. Then send the light out from your heart to heal all beings in the world. Imagine they become well, happy and peaceful.
7. *Chant a mantra aloud.* For example, “Namo Buddhaya” (homage to the Buddha), or if you prefer Vajrayana Buddhism, “Om Mani Padme Hung.” Focus on the sound as you chant and on the silence between chanting each mantra.

Take your time with these meditations. Do them very slowly and carefully, with moment-by-moment awareness, resisting the habit of rushing.

If you have time, you can do a longer meditation, such as a recorded guided meditation from a well-respected teacher, perhaps on a meditation app or video. Or, do one of the following:

1. *Flame meditation.* Look at a candle flame and memorize its appearance (size, shape, colors, movement, surrounding glow). Close your eyes and visualize the flame clearly in front of you. Open eyes to look at it again and then close them and try again (as many times as you need) to visualize it more clearly. Visualize it moving slowly toward your forehead. Imagine it enters into your forehead and illuminates your whole head, then very slowly travels down into your heart, illuminating it. Then imagine that the flame fills your whole body with white light. Then imagine the light from your body shines out into the area around you, then fills the room. Try to visualize the light spreading out further and further in all directions until it fills the universe. Imagine the light heals and brings peace and happiness to all beings.
2. *Visualization of the Buddha or a Mahayana or Vajrayana deity.* Gaze at a statue or picture of Buddha, or if you prefer Mahayana or Vajrayana Buddhism, a statue or picture of a deity such as Amitabha, Avalokiteshwara (Chenrezig), Vajradhara, Vajrasattva, Medicine Buddha, Quan Yin, or Tara. Gaze at the image and then focus your gaze from the top of the image's head to the feet, and then close your eyes and try to visualize the image, from one part of the image to another part, in front of you. Open your eyes and gaze again when the image isn't clear, and then close your eyes and practice visualizing the image in front of you, again and again. Imagine the Buddha or deity blesses you, filling you with peace, happiness and well-being.

To complete your meditation session, recite a prayer dedicating the merit. For example, "May all beings be well, happy and peaceful."

Try the different types of meditation to find which ones feel best for you. Different ones might work better at different times.

Those who have a mental illness should first consult their therapist about practicing meditation. Especially for those with symptoms of hallucinations, delusions, or anxiety, meditation involving prolonged concentration is not advisable; instead, it might be best to practice a grounding tactile sensory meditation such as mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of breathing, or mindful walking.

Don't force yourself in meditation; don't try to achieve a certain result. Instead, try to keep a good balance of enough effort to stay alert and enough relaxation to deeply calm the mind.

Don't try to experience an altered state, open the "third eye," raise kundalini, or obtain psychic powers, which can be very dangerous, harming you mentally and/or physically. Also, such attempts generate desires, expectations and disappointments and often increase egoism.

Buddhist meditation means allowing your mind to relax and expand into its blissful, pure natural state, free from mental obstructions. Any psychic phenomena happen on their own without desire or expectation.

Technology assisted meditation and other secular or non-Buddhist meditation might be effective but they don't lead toward lasting peace and happiness if such techniques aren't practiced along with Dharmic principles.

For meditation to give us ongoing calmness and deep satisfaction, we need to gradually clear our mental obstructions—anger, hatred, jealousy, craving, arrogance, egoism, fears and so forth. We all have at least subtle levels of these emotions; they manifest to some degree when we are provoked, when we lose our patience, or when we face challenging situations, including during addiction recovery.

Even when we aren't actively feeling these emotions, they cause subtle tension in our mind that prevents us from attaining a deep meditation. So, we need to practice the Dharma to process and sublimate these emotions.

In addition, practicing the Dharma gives our life meaning and direction, which counteracts some of the factors that lead to addiction.

After some time of practicing meditation along with the Dharma, we will notice benefits in our daily lives, such as more confidence and better coping skills, more patience and flexibility, better concentration and clearer thinking.

Then we can practice meditation for the virtues, insight and wisdom that it brings rather than simply for a way to feel better.

Sixteen Dreams of King Pasenadi (Mahāsupina Jataka No. 77)

One morning, King Pasenadi, the king of Kosala, woke up in such terror that he couldn't get up; he lay huddled on his bed. When the sun started to rise, his priests and chaplains came to him to ask whether he had slept well.

He responded, "How could I sleep well? Just this morning I dreamed sixteen vivid dreams, and I have been in terror ever since! Tell me, my advisors, what it all means."

They said, "We shall be able to judge when we hear them."

The king told him about the sixteen dreams. The priests looked worried, wringing their hands, and the king asked why they were doing so.

They responded, "Sire, these are evil dreams."

He asked, "What will come of them?"

They answered, "One of three calamities—harm to your kingdom, your life or your riches."

He asked, "Is there a remedy for this?"

They replied, "Undoubtedly these dreams are so threatening as to be without remedy, but we will find a remedy nevertheless."

The king asked what they propose to do, and they told him that wherever four roads meet, they will offer the appropriate sacrifices. The king told them that his life is in their hands, and to hurry and act to keep him safe. The priests each thought to themselves that large sums of money and large amounts of every kind of food will soon be theirs. Telling the king to have no fear, they left the palace. They had pits dug for the sacrifices, and collected all kinds of four-footed animals that had no blemish and a multitude of birds. They went back and forth to the king to ask him for this or that.

Queen Mallika noticed all the commotion and asked the king why the priests kept coming to him. When he told her about his unlucky dreams and the priests' efforts to protect him from evil by offering sacrifices, she asked,

"Has your majesty consulted the Chief Brahmin of this world and the world of the devas?"

He responded, "Who is he, my dear?"

She said, "Don't you know the chief person of all the world, the all-knowing and pure, the spotless master-brahmin? Surely, he, the Buddha, will understand your dreams. Go ask him."

“And so I will, my queen,” said the king.

The king then went to the monastery, bowed to the Buddha and sat down. The Buddha asked him what brought him there so early in the morning. The king told him that he had sixteen terrifying dreams and that the priests warned him that the dreams foretell calamity and to avert evil they must protect him by sacrificing animals. The king said that they are busy with their preparations, and that many living creatures have the fear of death before their eyes. He said,

“I pray you tell me what will come of my dreams, O Blessed One.”

The Buddha said that there is none other except him that can tell what his dreams signify or what will come of them, and requested the king to tell him the dreams as they appeared to him.

The king said that in the first dream, he saw four jet-black bulls that came together from the four directions to the royal courtyard with the intent to fight, and a great crowd of people gathered together to see the bullfight. but the bulls only roared and bellowed and then left without fighting. The king asked the Buddha what will come of this dream.

The Buddha said, “Sire, that dream will have no issue in your days or in mine. But hereafter, when kings shall be stingy and unrighteous, and when people will be unrighteous, in days when the world is perverted, when good is waning and evil is equally waxing, in those days of the world’s backsliding there shall fall no rains from the skies, the storms will not come on time, the crops shall wither and famine will arise. Then the clouds will gather as if for rain from the four quarters of the skies, and there shall be a hurry to bring inside the rice and crops the women had spread in the sun to dry, for fear the harvest shall get wet. With shovel and basket in hand the men shall go out to bank up the dikes. As though in sign of coming rain, the thunder shall bellow and lightening will flash from the clouds. But like the bulls in your dream that didn’t fight, the clouds shall flee away without raining. This is what shall come of this dream. But no harm from it shall come to you, for it was with regard to the future that you dreamed this dream. What the priests told you was said only to get themselves some profit. Tell me your second dream, sire.”

The king said that in his second dream, he saw little tiny trees and shrubs burst through the soil, and when they had grown only a few inches high, they flowered and bore fruit.

“Sire,” said the Buddha, “this dream shall have fulfillment when the world has fallen into decay and when human lives are short. In times to come passions will be strong, and quite young girls shall go to live with men, and they will conceive and bear children. The flowers and fruits symbolize their children. But you, sire, have nothing to fear from it. Tell me your third dream, O king.”

The king said, "I saw cows sucking the milk of calves to which they had given birth that day. This was my third dream. What shall come of it?"

The Buddha responded, "This dream too shall have fulfillment only in days to come, when age is no longer respected. In the future, showing no reverence toward parents or parents-in-law, people will themselves administer the family estate and if they wish, will give food and clothing to the old folks, but will not do so if they don't wish to. Then the old folks, destitute and dependent, exist on the favor and whim of their own children, like big cows being suckled by young calves. But you have nothing to fear from it. Tell me your fourth dream."

The king said, "I saw men unyoking a team of sturdy and strong oxen and setting young steers to draw the load, and the steers, too weak to pull the load, refused to pull it and stood still so the wagons didn't move at all. This was my fourth dream. What shall come of it?"

The Buddha replied, "Here again, the dream shall not have fulfillment until the future, the days of unrighteous kings. For in days to come, selfish and greedy kings shall show no respect to wise leaders who are skilled in diplomacy, successful and able to complete business. Nor shall they appoint to the courts of law and justice aged councilors of wisdom and of learning in the law. No, they shall honor the very young and foolish, and appoint such to preside in the courts. And these latter, ignorant of state-craft and of practical knowledge, shall not be able to bear the burden of their honors or to govern, but because of their incompetence shall throw off the yoke of office. The aged and wise leaders, although able to cope with all difficulties, will keep in mind how they were passed over and will decline to help, saying, 'It's no business of ours as we are outsiders; let the boys of the inner circle see to it.' So they will stand aloof, and the kings' governments will fall to ruin. It shall be as when the yoke was laid on the young steers who were not strong enough for the burden and not upon the team of sturdy and strong oxen who alone were able to do the work. You have nothing to fear from it. Tell me your fifth dream."

The king said, "I saw a horse with a mouth on each side of its head to which food was given to both sides and it ate with both its mouths. This was my fifth dream. What shall come of it?"

The Buddha explained, "This dream also will not have its fulfillment until the future, in the days of unrighteous and foolish kings, who will appoint unrighteous and covetous men to be judges. These base ones, fools, despising the good, will take bribes from both sides as they sit in the seat of judgment, and will be filled with this two-fold corruption like the horse that ate fodder with two mouths at once. But you have nothing to fear from it. Tell me your sixth dream."

The king said, "I saw people holding a well scoured golden bowl worth a hundred thousand coins, and begging an old jackal to urinate in it. And I saw the beast do so. This was my sixth dream. What shall come of it?"

The Buddha responded, "This dream also will not have its fulfillment until the future. In the days to come, unrighteous kings, though born from a royal line, mistrusting the descendants of their old nobility, shall not honor them but instead will exalt the low-born; whereby the nobles

shall be brought low and the low-born raised to lordship. Then the great families will have to be dependent on the upstarts and shall offer them their daughters in marriage. And the union of the noble maidens with the low-born shall be like the urinating of the old jackal into the golden bowl. But you have nothing to fear from it. Tell me your seventh dream.”

The king said, “A man was weaving rope, sir, and as he wove, he threw it down at his feet. Under his bench lay a hungry female jackal which kept eating the rope as he wove, but without the man knowing it. This is what I saw. This was my seventh dream. What shall come of it?”

The Buddha answered, “This dream also will not have its fulfillment until the future. For in days to come, women will lust after men, strong drink, extravagant clothing, jewelry, roaming, and seeking the joys of this world. In their shamelessness and recklessness these women will drink strong drink with their lovers; they will flaunt in garlands and perfumes and creams, and heedless of even the most important household duties, they will keep watching for their lovers. In all these ways they will waste the savings from the hard work of their husbands, like the jackal under the bench ate up the rope of the rope-maker. But you have nothing to fear from it. Tell me your eighth dream.”

The king said, “At a palace gate I saw a big pitcher full to the brim standing amid a number of empty pitchers. And from all directions came a constant stream of people, rich and poor, carrying pots of water which they poured into the already full pitcher. The water overflowed and drained away. But they kept on pouring more and more water into the overflowing pitcher without a single person giving a single glance at the empty pitchers. This was my eighth dream. What shall come of it?”

The Buddha explained, “This dream too will not have its fulfillment until the future. In days to come the world will decay. The kingdom will grow weak, its kings will become poor and stingy. These kings in their poverty will require all the people to work for them. For the kings’ sake the working people will leave their own work and grow crops, make and operate sugar mills, lay out flower gardens and orchards and gather the fruit. As they gather all this produce they will fill the royal storage and warehouses to overflowing but won’t be able to even glance at their own empty barns at home. Thus it is like filling up the full pitcher, ignoring the empty ones. But you have nothing to fear from it. Tell me your ninth dream.”

The king said, “I saw a deep pool with sloping banks overgrown with the five kinds of lotuses. From every side, two-footed and four-footed creatures flocked there to drink. The deep water in the middle was muddy but the water was clear and sparkling at the edges where the creatures went down to the pool. This was my ninth dream. What shall come of it?”

The Buddha replied, “This dream too will not have its fulfillment until the future. In days to come kings will become increasingly corrupt; they will rule according to their own desires and pleasures and will not judge according to what is right. These kings will crave wealth and store up money from bribes. They will not show mercy, love and compassion toward their people but will be fierce and cruel, amassing wealth by crushing their subjects and by taxing them to

the last penny. Unable to pay the oppressive tax, the people will flee the villages and towns and take refuge in the borders of the country. The heart of the land will be a wilderness while the remote areas along the borders will teem with people, like the water was muddy in the middle of the pool and clear at the edges. But you have nothing to fear from it. Tell me your tenth dream.”

The king said, “I saw rice boiling in a pot without getting done. It looked as though it was sharply marked so that the cooking went on in three distinct stages. Part of it was watery, part of it was hard and raw, and the remaining part was cooked nicely. This was my tenth dream. What shall come of it?”

The Buddha answered, “This dream too will not have its fulfillment until the future. In days to come kings will become increasingly corrupt; the people surrounding the kings will become corrupt too, as will the priests, householders, townspeople and countryfolk; yes, all people alike will become corrupt, including sages and priests. Next, their deities—the spirits to whom they offer sacrifice, the spirits of the trees, the spirits of the air—will become corrupt also. The very winds that blow over the lands of these unrighteous kings will grow cruel and lawless; they will shake the mansions of the skies and thereby kindle the anger of the spirits that dwell there, so that they will not allow the rain to fall—or if it does rain, it will not fall on all the kingdom at once. The rain will not fall on all crops alike to relieve them from drought. The rain will not fall at the same time over the whole area; if it rains on the upper part, it won’t fall on the lower part. In some areas, the crops will be spoiled by a heavy downpour, and in others, the crops will wither from drought, and in yet others, the rain will fall at the right time. So the crops in a single kingdom—like the rice in the one pot—will have no uniform character. But you have nothing to fear from it. Tell me your eleventh dream.”

The king said, “I saw sour buttermilk traded for precious sandalwood worth 100,000 pieces of money. This was my eleventh dream. What shall come of it?”

The Buddha answered, “This dream too will not have its fulfillment until the future—in days to come when my teaching is waning. In days to come, many greedy and shameless monks will arise, who for their belly’s sake will preach the very words with which I warned against greed! Because they have deserted the truth to gratify their belly and have sided with sectarians, they will fail to make their teaching lead to Nirvana. Their only thought as they preach will be by fine words and sweet voices to induce people to give them expensive things and to give gifts. Others will position themselves along highways, at the street-corners, at the doors of kings’ palaces, and so forth, and will stoop to preach for money, even for a pittance! And as they trade away for food or clothing or coins my teaching which leads to Nirvana, they will be like those who traded sour buttermilk for sandalwood worth 100,000 pieces of money. But you have nothing to fear from it. Tell me your twelfth dream.”

The king said, “I saw empty dried pumpkins sinking in the water. What shall come of it?”

The Buddha responded, "This dream too will not have its fulfillment until the future, in the days of unrighteous kings, when the world is perverted. In those days kings will show favor not to sons of the noble, but to the low-born only, who will become great lords, while the noble ones sink into poverty. In the royal presence, in the palace gates, in the council chamber and in the courts of justice, the words of the low-born alone (represented by the empty pumpkins) will be firmly established. Also, in the assemblies of monks, in enquiries about proper behavior, rules of conduct, discipline, or lodging, the counsel only of the wicked, corrupt monks will be considered and not that of the modest monks. But you have nothing to fear from it. Tell me your thirteenth dream."

The king said, "I saw huge blocks of solid rock as big as houses, floating like ships upon the water. What shall come of it?"

The Buddha replied, "This dream also shall not have fulfillment before such times as those of which I have spoken. For in those days unrighteous kings will show honor to the low-born, who will become great lords while the noble ones sink into poverty. The upstarts alone will be respected and not the noble ones. In the royal presence, in the council chamber, or in the courts of justice the words of the nobles learned in the law (which the solid rocks represent) will drift idly by and not sink deep into the hearts of men. When they speak, the upstarts will merely laugh at them to scorn them, saying 'What is it these fellows are saying?' So too in the assemblies of monks, men will not deem worthy of respect the excellent among the monks; their words will not sink deep but will drift idly by, like the rocks floating on the water. But you have nothing to fear from it. Tell me your fourteenth dream."

The king said, "I saw tiny frogs, no bigger than miniature flowerets, swiftly pursuing large black snakes, chopping them up like so many lotus stalks and gobbling them up. What shall come of it?"

The Buddha explained, "This dream too shall not have fulfillment until those days to come such as those of which I have spoken, when the world is decaying. For then will men's passions be so strong and their lusts so hot that they will be infatuated with the very youngest of their wives, who will control the wealth and everything in the house. If the husband asks where the money or a robe is, he will be told that it is where it is, that he should mind his own business and not be so inquisitive as to what is, or is not, in *her* house. And in various ways the wives, with abuse and goading taunts, will establish their power over their husbands as they would over slaves and servants. It will be like when tiny frogs gobbled up the big black snakes. But you have nothing to fear from it. Tell me your fifteenth dream."

The king said, "I saw a village crow, which had all the ten vices, escorted by a retinue of those birds which, because of their golden sheen, are called Royal Golden Mallards. What shall come of it?"

The Buddha answered, "This dream too shall not have fulfillment until the future, until the reign of weakling kings. In days to come kings will arise who will know nothing about ruling,

and will be cowards and fools. Fearing to be deposed and removed from their royal estate, they will raise to power not their peers, but their footmen, bath-attendants, barbers and such-like. Thus, shut out from royal favor and unable to support themselves, the noble ones shall be reduced to dancing attendance on the upstarts, like the crow had Royal Golden Mallards for a retinue. But you have nothing to fear from it. Tell me your sixteenth dream.”

The king said, “Normally, panthers prey on goats. But I saw goats chasing panthers and devouring them—munch, munch, munch! While at the sight of goats in the distance, wolves fled quaking in fear and hid themselves in the thicket. Such was my dream. What shall come of it?”

The Buddha responded, “This dream too shall not have fulfillment until the future, until the reign of unrighteous kings. In those days the low-born will be raised to lordship and be made royal favorites while the noble ones will sink into obscurity and distress. Gaining influence in the courts of law because of their favor with the king, these upstarts will claim the ancestral estates and all the property of the old nobility. And when these latter plead their rights before the courts, then will the king’s minions have them beaten and tortured and thrown out with words of scorn such as, ‘Know your place, fools! What? Do you dispute with us? The king shall know of your insolence, and we will have your hands and feet chopped off and other correctives applied!’ Then the terrified nobles will affirm that their own belongings really belong to the overbearing upstarts and will tell the favorites to accept them. Then they will hurry home and cower in fear. Likewise, evil monks will harass good, worthy monks until the good monks, finding none to help them, will flee to the jungle. And this oppression of the nobles and of the good monks by the low-born and by the evil monks will be like the intimidation of wolves by goats. But you have nothing to fear from it. For this dream too has reference to future times only.”

The Buddha continued, “It was not truth, it was not love for you, that prompted the priests to prophesy as they did. No, it was greed and the insight that comes from selfishness that shaped their self-seeking utterances.”

Thus did the Buddha explain the meaning of the sixteen great dreams. He added, “You, sire, are not the first to have these dreams; they were dreamed by kings of bygone days also; and then, as now, the priests found in them a pretext for sacrifices, whereupon at the instance of the wise and good, the Bodhisattva was consulted and the dreams were explained by them of old time in just the same manner as they have now been explained.” Then he told a story from one of his past lives when he was a hermit living in the Himalaya mountains and interpreted the sixteen dreams of King Brahmadata.

Dharma Discussion – World Decline:

Through interpreting King Pasenadi’s dreams, the Buddha gave the world a prophecy about the times in which we are now living.

While horrific events and evil leadership have existed here and there throughout history, now it appears that the whole world is in a decline.

The first and tenth dreams are consistent with global warming and the associated increases in droughts, flooding and unpredictable weather patterns. Scientists have found that the number and duration of droughts has increased by nearly a third worldwide since the year 2000, according to the United Nations. There has been a continuing upward trend in flood disasters worldwide since 1990 according to the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

The second, third, seventh and fourteenth dreams reflect common behaviors in today's world due to unrestrained lusts and desires.

As to the other dreams, we can see that the Buddha predicted the behavior of many of today's leaders. We can assume the dated words "king" includes "political leader," "lords" include "those in powerful positions," and "low-born" means "morally underdeveloped"—those full of greed, ruthless ambition, hatred, vengeance and arrogance and without much patience, compassion, tolerance or other virtues.

It's perhaps some comfort that all of this was predicted—destined—to happen, so there's no reason to agonize that the world "shouldn't be this way."

We couldn't have done anything to prevent it. No one could have prevented it.

So we can't blame anyone or any group for causing it; there's no use in pointing fingers and spreading more hate. But that certainly doesn't mean that we should just sit back and do nothing. There are plenty of ways we can make the best of this situation, as discussed below.

But before we get to that, let's address some questions that might arise.

Some of you might ask, why was I born into this chaotic environment? I don't deserve this, I didn't cause this, I don't belong here.

A short answer is that you have an important spiritual part to play here in the world, just as it is. We are all interdependent, so we affect each other—and help each other—more than we know.

The discussion below provides a more complete answer.

Another question you might have is, what about karma? Why are evildoers ("low-borns") rewarded with so much success and power, while good people ("noble ones") are suffering so much, being exploited by them?

We all have done countless unknown good and bad actions in our past lives, and we never know when the effects of a particular karma will ripen. And usually there is a time lag, perhaps many lifetimes, between actions and their karmic results.

This time lag generates doubt in many people; if we can't see the karmic connection between the action and the result, then why should we believe in it?

During the night when he became enlightened, the Buddha saw people's karmic causes and effects, and later, he often pointed out to his student monks the karmic results of the good or bad actions done in previous lives of various individuals they encountered.

And if we think deeply about it, a significant time lag between action and result is necessary for people to develop higher moral character. If there was no time lag—if each good or bad action had a direct corresponding consequence—we would do good actions because we expect an immediate pleasant result, and we would avoid doing harmful actions because we know we will suffer an immediate unpleasant result. So, our moral development would remain at the level of a dog or young child, motivated by immediate reward and punishment. On the other hand when there is a time lag between cause and effect, we observe the effects of our actions on others and feel rewarded when others are pleased by our kindness, compassion, patience, helpfulness and so forth, so we develop these virtues to seek approval from others. From that level, eventually we can attain an even higher level of moral development in which we do altruistic and virtuous actions without looking for the approval or appreciation of others.

But aren't these degenerate times just upsetting people so much that they can't develop virtues, and instead increase bad karma?

The hardships might push us to our limits, but they are an opportunity to purify or "burn away" our past negative karmas.

Most people are not interested in developing virtues but instead just want to enjoy life, be comfortable, and pursue their desires and cravings. In these modern times when they have all the freedom to do so, one after the other desire is allowed to run its course until eventually they realize that it doesn't lead to full satisfaction and that it's time to start seeking a spiritual path to true happiness. But many, like addicts, must pursue desires over and over and then hit "rock bottom"—total loss and desperation—numerous times before they realize it.

Others, observing the extreme greed and egoism and seeking relief from the misery of this stressful world, are compelled to seek pathways to peace such as meditation, which they wouldn't be motivated to do if they were just enjoying a relaxing life.

They need to be shaken to awaken. The first of the Four Noble Truths is that life is full of suffering. One must contemplate that this world is unsatisfactory, full of suffering, in order to turn one's mind with conviction to the Dharma, to have the motivation to practice the Dharma. Those who are further along the path to enlightenment still have flaws to overcome and virtues to perfect, which only can happen if someone tests their patience, perseverance, compassion, equanimity and so forth. One can't be a hero without an adversary or adversity. So, they need "low-borns" to truly test and challenge them with hardships and problems.

But how can we find real peace and happiness if we feel, angry, resentful, or outraged toward those who are creating the chaos and problems we see?

Or when we have feelings of dread, depression, or hopelessness about the future?

Harboring such feelings for extended periods of time takes a toll on our health.

So, we keep ourselves distracted by focusing on screens—scrolling on our phones, watching videos, engaging with social media, playing videogames, and so forth.

Some of us distract ourselves by extreme exercise, overindulging in social activities, and/or exhausting ourselves with work, not keeping a healthy balance.

Many of us withdraw emotionally from the world. All the bad news, catastrophes in the world and the increased dangers and instability make us feel helpless, powerless, overwhelmed, numb, or unable to feel much empathy, or we disassociate in an unhealthy way. This is analogous to compassion fatigue in the medical community.

Some of us feel that life is not valuable in this decaying world, so we become reckless. And others of us live in a bubble of denial, avoiding or resisting any information we don't like. When we suppress our feelings by denial or by distracting, withdrawing, disassociating and/or devaluing ourselves, although we're trying to avoid stress and anxiety, we're actually still building it up, harming our mental, spiritual and physical health.

There are some who seek relief by following one of the many modern spiritual guides who claim to have had a spontaneous awakening or attained enlightenment and who post videos or conduct programs to help others awaken, experience satori, attain non-duality, or manifest their desires—without any need to meditate, study, accumulate merit, or purify the mind. They may have had experiences of “awakening” and great bliss but after some time, despite their assertions of non-duality, the mental obscurations of attachment, egoism, pride and so forth return. Similarly, people who experience ego dissolution under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs (which can be very dangerous) such as DMT or ayahuasca recover their egos and mental obscurations afterward.

The Buddha encountered several spiritual teachers, such as the Kassapa (Kashyapa) brothers (Vinaya Pitaka Mahavagga 1:7-20), who believed they were enlightened and/or attained advanced states of bliss, but he knew they were not enlightened and when they were challenged, their arrogance, egoism, attachment or jealousy was revealed.

While certain Zen and Dzogchen practices are designed to lead to spontaneous experience of emptiness, satori, or non-duality, they require a highly qualified master who prepares the student's mind with rigorous study and practice under his guidance, which has a firm foundation in centuries of instructions and experiences of genuine enlightened masters.

Following a modern guide who doesn't have these qualifications leads to disillusionment if the desired result is not achieved, or leads to delusion and spiritual egoism if one achieves altered states, insights, psychic phenomena or blissful experiences without purity of mind.

So, back to how to make the best of this situation: what guidance did the Buddha give us for thriving in this declining world?

The Buddha helped King Pasenadi in this story in two ways—which also provide guidance to us. One way was by pointing out to the king that the priests were trying to exploit him. The Buddha thus suggests that we shouldn't be naïve or compromised by fear but rather we should learn to be aware of others attempting to exploit us and not let them do so. This theme will be addressed later in this discussion.

The second way is that he changed the king's narrative from negative to positive.

We all have narratives about ourselves and the world and many—such as the narratives we get from news and social media—make us worry too much.

The Buddha changed the king's narrative from “danger!” to “everything is okay.”

This is an important practice—to change our narratives from negative to positive, destructive to constructive. How do we do that?

We label the uncomfortable feelings that we have and then determine its converse in which we are healing and creating something constructive.

For example, if you feel resentment, create a narrative of generating love; if you feel fear, create a narrative of being fearless; if you feel helpless, create a narrative of helping others; if you feel like a victim, create a narrative of helping yourself and others not be victims; if you feel hopeless, create a narrative of resilience and taking on challenges; if you feel you are living in a hell-world, create a narrative of being curious about it and making it an adventure.

It's not simply an affirmation, but something you contemplate and then act on to make it true.

How can we make our positive narrative true? How do we put it in action?

We start by generating lovingkindness as part of daily life, integrating it into our routine, in simple, easy ways, for example:

Practice daily lovingkindness meditation and/or prayers wishing others peace, happiness and well-being.

Be aware of your kind words and deeds each day and remember that they are merit (good karmas). Dedicate the merit for the benefit of other beings before you go to sleep each night.

Whenever you see someone who seems to be suffering, sad, stressed, angry or upset, wish them happiness and peace.

When you encounter “low-borns” or anyone who disturbs you, pray or wish that they soon find a path to the Dharma so they will heal from their mental afflictions and stop causing harm.

Make a conscious effort to cheer up others with friendliness wherever you are.

At your job, think about creating peace for others by the work you do.

When you prepare food for others, think about providing good nourishment for their health.

When you park your car or take a seat, rather than taking the best space, leave the most convenient spaces available for those who might need them more than you.

If you create music or art, make it a medium of healing—spiritually uplifting or evoking emotions to help others process or sublimate their emotions.

You also can put lovingkindness into action in your spare time.

For example, volunteer at a temple or meditation center with whatever tasks might be needed. Start a meditation group at work, in your neighborhood, at a library, or among your friends, perhaps with recorded guided meditations.

Volunteer to help the needy, for example: providing food or other necessities for disaster victims, women's shelter, or homeless, or tutoring underprivileged children.

Join a group or organization that advocates for or benefits a wholesome cause.

Volunteer at a charity that inspires you.

Volunteer with an animal rescue or shelter, or volunteer to foster pets.

Visit lonely elderly relatives or neighbors.

Remove trash from a neighborhood park trail, stream, riverbank or beach.

Keep your mind aware and open to find other ways to help or benefit others as a selfless service.

These activities are exercises to train our minds to be caring and helpful wherever we are, without seeking any reciprocation, attention, appreciation, particular outcome, or reward. This is how you reduce ego and develop equanimity and detachment (which include universal love and compassion and thus are different from apathy and withdrawal).

But actually, we do get a reward: when we direct our mind or offer our time in ways that benefit others, we gain direction, meaning and purpose in life.

Scientists have shown that having meaning and purpose in life gives us more energy and happiness. Instead of feeling drained of energy from dwelling in disgust, worry or hopelessness, we gain energy from kind thoughts, words and actions.

So, by helping others, we help ourselves.

When you act with lovingkindness to benefit other beings, you're offering love, time, energy and/or skills—your abundance—to others. Even when you start small and simple, if you try to maintain a feeling of having abundance and generosity, you train your mind to be uplifting and altruistic, like a Buddha.

When you do this, you will find more and more interesting opportunities to benefit others, and you build up your confidence, capability, resilience, and other good qualities.

As you make more merit and share it with others, you increase your power and good fortune. In this way, you create an unstoppable upward spiral of increasing opportunities, lovingkindness, virtues and merit.

One might ask, how can our small actions, which seem so insignificant in this chaotic world, actually make any difference?

Contemplate interdependence. Each Dharmic thought is energy, like a drop of light that combines with the drops of light of countless beings, building up an unimaginably powerful ocean of light to gradually heal the darkness in the world. Each of us needs the others to help build up this ocean. We all support each other. And our actions are an example and encouragement to others to engage in similar actions; we demonstrate behaviors that we want to see in others.

And each of us has our individual unique contributions, and our own sphere of influence.

Lovingkindness, however, does not mean always saying yes or being a pushover, doormat or people pleaser.

People pleasing means trying to please others while craving validation, love, approval, acceptance, appreciation, reciprocation or reward. It arises often as a result of one's upbringing or from low self-esteem.

People pleasers may be afraid of disappointing or angering another, or of having a different opinion, or of being rejected if others aren't pleased or expectations aren't met.

They may not even notice their own emotions or needs or may hide them as they try to ease the emotions of others.

If you are a people pleaser, you may be encouraging people to exploit you, which increases their negative karma and therefore harms them and ultimately is not kind to them.

This is misplaced kindness and compassion, trying to satisfy their mundane desires of a few individuals at the expense of your own well-being, draining your resources while rewarding them for being selfish.

We must take time to recharge and take care of our needs and priorities. If we spread ourselves too thin trying to please, we become exhausted, impatient, hasty, irritable or regretful.

Or, after agreeing to do things for others, we find we can't do it or we forget, breaking our word.

We need to take care of our spiritual needs and well-being to be of the best assistance to others.

So, we need to set and maintain boundaries. We set boundaries by expressing what we will and won't do, allow, or accept, and what we will do if the boundary is crossed.

Some of us are more aware of our limits and set good boundaries, knowing when to say no. But some of us, wanting to be agreeable and maintain harmony, don't set or maintain good boundaries.

Especially if we aren't skilled at setting and maintaining boundaries, we can be vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation by all kinds of people. From foes to family, clerks to clergy, there are so many people who exploit others, especially in these degenerate times, as predicted by the Buddha in this story.

When someone wants you to do something, pay close attention to how you feel inside, your intuition. Do you feel hesitant? Uncomfortable? Confused? Pressured?

First, ask yourself, am I afraid to disappoint? Worried about rejection or conflict? Afraid they won't like me if I say no?

If so, you might need to work on your self-esteem, courage, assertiveness, equanimity and detachment.

Next, assess the request and the person making it. Ask yourself, is there something about their character, habits or possible motivation that I question? Do they not really need what they're requesting? Do they not really need me to do it? Are they trying to evoke guilt or pity or using another manipulation tactic? Do I have to sacrifice something important to do what they want?

If so, decline their request or give yourself some time—say that you need to check something (your calendar, your funds, your partner, your dog, whatever) before you can decide.

Be fully aware your own emotions and needs before giving a response.

This guidance on boundaries is especially important when we are dealing with the "low-born." We see how narcissism, abuse of power, and hypocrisy have risen dramatically in frequency in today's world, as reflected in the Buddha's interpretations of the king's dreams.

How can we use the Buddha's teachings to avoid feeling upset by such people?

Remember that love or compassion cannot coexist with fear. Nor can they coexist with hatred.

We have to find a way to feel lovingkindness or compassion rather than fear, anger or hatred toward them. This is not easy when we naturally respond to them with aversion.

First, if we remember that they will suffer the karmic results of their actions, then we can begin to feel some compassion for them. Think: they are creating so much suffering for themselves. We don't have to wish they be punished for their actions. Karma eventually will take care of it.

Second, we can practice again and again mentally wishing, "may they soon find a path to true peace and happiness." When they find it, they'll stop hurting others so much. They may not find the path in this lifetime, but that's not our concern.

The more we practice this, the more conviction we will have in saying it.

Third, just as scorpions, lions, snakes and vultures have their roles to play in the ecosystem, so we don't hate or destroy them, remember that "low-borns" have their role to play on the Earth—to create chaos and challenges. And we have our role to play—including recognizing our weaknesses and overcoming challenges in order to develop good qualities. So, we can appreciate the "low-borns" for serving as a catalyst for us to be able to fulfill that role.

Fourth, we don't have to like the "low-borns," and we don't want entangle ourselves with them by hating them or associating with them any more than we have to. But we can practice universal loving-kindness toward all sentient beings, including those who hate us and those who create obstacles for us, wishing that all attain nirvana.

Note that there are "low-borns" among spiritual teachers too, such as spiritual narcissists. The Buddha made the king aware of the greed and selfishness of the priests, and predicted that there would be "evil monks" in the future and that the excellent monks will be ignored. So, we need to scrutinize the character of spiritual teachers, guides and monks who we encounter so we can avoid being exploited or led astray. Some red flags include those who have questionable values, egoistic traits, or apparent attachment to money, fame, vanity, or materialistic lifestyle, or those who lack authentic spiritual lineage or training, appear insincere, lack genuine humility, seem controlling, and/or have pricey programs and marketing.

In general, make choices that support what resonates with you and what is aligned with your highest good.

While you can't always do something to help, you can speak kindly or mentally say a prayer, mantra or kind wishes.

To increase your courage, equanimity and healthy detachment, try to remember that everything is impermanent, it's always changing, and this world and everything in it is illusory, like a dream from which we eventually will awaken.

Remember that everything in the world is ultimately unsatisfactory, but living your life aligned with the Dharma brings more satisfaction and brings better quality people into your orbit.

Tissa with the Putrid Body

A young man from a noble family living in Srāvasthi (Sāvatti) heard the Buddha teach the Dharma and was so impressed that he decided to become a monk. After he was ordained, he became known as Venerable Tissa. After some time living at the monastery as a monk, a rash erupted all over his body. At first there were small pustules, pimples with pus, but as the disease progressed, they became the size of chickpeas, and eventually they became as large as fruits. Finally, they burst open and his body became covered with open sores. The infected sores began to smell bad, and consequently the monks called him Venerable Pūtigatta Tissa, which means Tissa with the Putrid Body. Over time, his bones became fragile and easily broken as they started to disintegrate. Walking was extremely difficult and he couldn't bathe himself or wash his clothes.

His upper and under robes were filthy and stained with dried blood. The other monks at the monastery didn't take care of him but instead abandoned him, and therefore he stayed in bed without anyone to protect him.

The Buddha was aware of this. The Buddhas always survey the world twice a day. At dawn, they survey the world looking with their divine vision through the extent of the galaxy towards the Perfumed Chamber (the Buddha's meditation hut), taking cognizance of all they see. In the evening, they survey the world looking from the Perfumed Chamber and taking cognizance of all that is outside of it. At this time, Venerable Tissa appeared within the Buddha's divine vision. The Buddha, knowing that the monk Tissa was ready to become an arahant, thought to himself,

"This monk has been abandoned by his associates; at the present time he has no other refuge than me."

So the Buddha left the Perfumed Chamber, and pretending to be making the rounds of the monastery, went to the fire room where the monastery's stove was always burning. He washed a large pot, filled it with water, set it on the stove, and waited for it to boil. When he knew it was hot, he went and took hold of the end of Venerable Tissa's bed.

The monks nearby said to the Buddha, "Please depart, reverend sir, we will carry him for you."

They carried the bed with Tissa laying in it to the fire room. The Buddha requested them to bring a container of hot water and take Tissa's upper robe and wash it thoroughly in hot water and lay it in the sun to dry. Then the Buddha moistened Tissa's body with hot water, and bathed him. At the end of his bath his upper robe was dry. The Buddha had the monks put on Tissa's clean upper robe and wash his lower robe in hot water and lay it in the sun to dry. As soon as the water had evaporated from Tissa's body, his lower robe was dry. Then Tissa put on one of the robes as an under garment and the other as an upper robe.

With his body refreshed and mind tranquil, he lay down again on the bed.

The Buddha stood at Tissa's pillow and said to him, "Monk, consciousness will depart from you, your body will become useless and, like a log, will lie on the ground." Then he said the following stanza:

Not long, alas, and it will lie—
This body here upon the earth,
Rejected, void of consciousness,
And useless as a rotten log.

Dhammapada 41

At the conclusion of the teaching, Venerable Tissa attained arahantship and reached Nirvana. The Buddha performed the funeral rites over his body, and taking the relics, caused a shrine to be built for the relics.

The monks at the monastery asked the Buddha, "Reverend sir, where was Venerable Tissa reborn?"

The Buddha replied, "He has reached final Nirvana, monks."

"Reverend sir," they asked, "how did it happen that such a monk, having the supporting tendencies to attain arahantship, came to have a diseased body? Why did his bones disintegrate? Through what deed in a former birth did he obtain the dispositions requisite for the attainment of arahantship?"

The Buddha responded, "Monks, all these happened solely because of deeds he committed in a previous existence."

The monks asked, "But, reverend sir, what did he do?"

The Buddha said, "Well then, monks, listen." And he told the following story of one of Tissa's past lives.

In the time of the previous Buddha, Buddha Kassapa (Kashyapa), Tissa was a bird hunter. He used to catch large numbers of birds and most of these he served to the king and other royalty. Most of those that he did not give to royalty he would sell. He was concerned that if he killed and kept the birds he didn't sell, they would rot. But if he didn't kill them, they would fly away. To prevent his captive birds from flying away, he would break their leg-bones and wing-bones and lay them aside, piling them in a heap. On the following day he would sell them. When he had too many, he would have some cooked also for himself.

One day, when flavorful food had been cooked for him, a monk who was an arahant stopped at the door of Tissa's house on an alms-round to receive food. When Tissa saw the monk, he made his mind serene and thought,

"I have killed and eaten many living creatures. A noble monk stands at my door, and an abundance of well-flavored food is in my house. I will therefore give him alms."

So, he took the monk's bowl and filled it with food, and bowed to the monk respectfully, saying,

"Reverend sir, may I obtain the highest fruit of the Dharma that you have seen."

The monk responded, "So be it."

Thus the Buddha completed the story of Tissa's past life. He explained, "Monks, it was through the meritorious deed Tissa then did that this result accrued to him. It was because he broke the bones of the birds that his body became diseased and his bones disintegrated. It was because he gave good food to the arahant that he attained arahantship."

Dharma Discussion - Illness:

The Buddha, instead of seeing Tissa as impaired by severe illness, saw that he was at his spiritual height, ripe for attaining enlightenment.

Indeed, this story illustrates that someone who is suffering the traumatic results of past negative karma is not a bad person, but on the contrary can be highly spiritually advanced. So, the Buddha went and cleaned Tissa, making him feel refreshed and relaxed, and he then became enlightened.

There are a few other stories of the Buddha or his monks visiting people who were very ill and putting them in a positive mental state by washing them, teaching the Dharma or extolling the virtues of the person. Some of the people recovered from illness, some were relieved of symptoms, and others attained a stage of enlightenment before passing away (Anguttara Nikaya 10.60 (Girimānanda); Samyutta Nikaya 55.26, 55.27 (Anathapindika)).

It is well-known that stress impairs health and healing, and that a positive mental state improves it. A meta-analysis of scientific studies has shown that "higher levels of emotional well-being are beneficial for recovery and survival in physically ill patients" and that "emotional well-being predicts long-term prognosis of physical illness." Sanne M.A. Lamers et al., J. Behav. Med. (Sept. 15, 2011).

The Buddha has given us many techniques for reducing stress and enhancing our emotional well-being.

However, when we're ill, the usual techniques of meditation and so forth may be difficult or impossible because our mind may be particularly scattered, foggy and unable to concentrate.

But there are plenty of ways that we can practice the Buddha's techniques even in the direst circumstances.

Indeed, it is in our moments of intense suffering that we desperately seek relief and well-being. And it's through our suffering that we can see ourselves in a deeper way than we ever did before.

To make the most out of our life during illness, we can consider illness as an asset to develop our mindfulness, process our emotions, enhance our capacity for lovingkindness and compassion, practice simple meditations, and deepen our understanding of Buddhist principles. And through this, we enhance our emotional well-being and our potential for healing.

Developing mindfulness and processing emotions

When we're sick, we often feel vulnerable, stressed and exhausted, which makes us more irritable, easily upset and likely to be short-tempered with others.

Emotions become more pronounced; deep emotions arise that we previously weren't aware of. So, we can use this opportunity to be more aware of our emotions, to be mindful of them. Rather than letting our mind be lost in endless loops of unpleasant thoughts, and perhaps guilt for having them, we mentally step back and make observations, acknowledging the emotions without judgment.

How do we do this exactly? Notice when you are feeling mentally uncomfortable. Observe your thoughts and determine who or what in particular is associated with these feelings—such as the future, your body, your partner, your child, a healthcare worker, studies, job, certain decisions.

Next, label the emotion—such as fear about the treatment, anxiety about the future, feeling neglected when loved ones don't visit or call, annoyance or anger at others for not meeting your needs, guilt for burdening family, worry about job, finances or responsibilities, regret for neglecting your health, anger toward someone for being unfair or incompetent, jealousy or resentment toward a rival who is healthy, hating your body for being weak, or just hating being sick.

Be bold in observing and labeling your feelings; it's okay to not feel okay, to not be your healthy self. Try not to compound your stress with guilt or self-criticism.

When you have the energy, you can take the next step of exploring some reasons you might be having these emotions which might provide insight for processing them. If you like, you can write in a journal. With all the time you spend alone while ill, you have opportunities to really examine and process your emotions.

Ask yourself questions such as:

Am I flexible, or inflexible, about what may happen in the future in regard to certain things?

Am I comparing myself with other patients or other family members?

Are my feelings or expectations based on my particular upbringing or culture?

Is there a pattern of feeling neglected or unloved from childhood?

Do I tend to avoid asking for help, accepting help, or speaking up for my needs?

Does my anger remind me of a past event when I felt mistreated, neglected or ignored?
Does my disgust with my weakness remind me of past experiences of feeling weak in contexts other than illness?
Do I have a tendency toward self-criticism?
Do I have a hard time delegating responsibilities to others?
Do I often feel that I am treated unfairly?
If it were possible, would I really want to trade places with—to actually become—my rival?
What are the worst things about being sick: discomfort? being confined? missing activities?

Consider whether some of the emotions may arise from trauma in your past, such as from abuse or neglect by a parent, family member, partner, or cultural group.

In contemplating unpleasant emotions, think of the Buddha and his teachings to find ways to calm and heal them. Here are some ideas:

Regarding feeling guilt or hesitation about burdening others or asking for help, ask yourself, am I really being too self-centered or entitled, or am I afraid of being judged as needy? Think about the neglect of Tissa in the story. We don't know from the story why the monks didn't take care of him, but they suddenly were willing to help when the Buddha appeared. Remembering Tissa's predicament, be confident and don't hesitate to reasonably ask for help or accept help from others while you're ill. Consider that in willingly helping you, they are making merit for themselves.

If you feel disgusted toward your body for its weakness, try instead to think of your body as healthy and strong enough to conquer the illness. It's a precious human body, the vehicle for attaining wisdom and enlightenment, the ultimate happiness.
Perhaps your illness is a warning to pay more attention to your body and understand better what it needs, rather than neglecting it or taking it for granted.
Nurture your body like you would nurture an ill child, and appreciate how it has worked for you for all these years of life, carrying you through all your life experiences.
You also can appreciate the illness for helping you learn to accept your vulnerability and weaknesses, and release unhealthy perfectionism.

Instead of regretting severe illness, consider it to be a wake-up call to your spiritual journey, just as Prince Siddhartha, before he became the Buddha, heeded the wake-up call of seeing the famous four sights: the old man, ill man, dead man and renunciant.

Hating being sick means you're resisting the present circumstance, frustrated by not being able to change it or get rid of it, which makes you feel worse, increasing your stress.
Contemplate that everything changes, every moment is new, and that physical discomfort is part of being alive in a body, with bodily sensations that are always changing.
Each moment, each experience, arises from causes and conditions, as the Buddha teaches.
Instead of wishing time away, experience each moment it as is, exploring it with curiosity and mindfulness moment by moment, being fully absorbed in the present moment.

You might find it helpful sometimes to use humor to relieve stress. For example, if you feel guilty for being demanding, or if you feel angry or frustrated, transform it into comedy by exaggerating these feelings as you imagine a caricature of yourself, like a cartoon, shouting outrageous words at the top of your lungs. Then have a good laugh!

When you feel angry at a healthcare worker or caregiver who apparently caused unnecessary pain, made a mistake or neglected your needs, try to feel compassion for them by considering that they might be frustrated, stressed, exhausted or very sorry, even if they don't show it. Calming your anger helps you heal. Yet, you need to advocate for yourself too—explain your needs, concerns and sensitivities.

Enhance capacity for lovingkindness and compassion

Illness is a great opportunity to practice lovingkindness and compassion.

When we go to the hospital or for medical visits, we can imagine all the people there who are suffering with various ailments, who are in pain, afraid, alone, miserable or dying.

We can wish or pray that all the patients be healed, free from pain, peaceful and comforted.

We can generate lovingkindness and gratitude for the efforts of doctors, nurses and staff, and others who support and care for us.

If you are in pain, try to accept that there is pain and make it a Dharmic practice by thinking: may my pain purify the pain of all sentient beings.

When your pain is extreme, think: may no other beings experience pain like this; may my pain substitute for others' pain.

If you feel neglected, wish that all other patients in the world not feel neglected.

If you feel helpless, wish that all other patients in the world not feel helpless.

If you feel afraid, wish that all other patients in the world feel strong and not afraid.

If you feel isolated or alone, wish that all other patients have loving companions with them.

If you feel depressed, wish that all other patients feel well, happy and peaceful.

As you do so, visualize patients all over the world becoming peaceful—smiling, free of suffering.

You might wonder, isn't this just magical thinking? No. It's a method that not only as a practical matter reduces your own agony, but more importantly, develops your compassion and purifies your mind, bringing you closer to enlightenment—and freedom from all suffering.

The more you practice lovingkindness and compassion with genuine heartfelt wishes, the more peaceful you become and the more healing and uplifting your presence is to others.

Think about how one toxic person can fill room full of people with tension, and in contrast, how a deeply loving, compassionate person can fill a room full of people with peace and happiness.

Have you experienced a tranquil atmosphere around a great Dharma teacher? You can aspire to be a healing presence like the teacher, by doing these practices.

In addition, have compassion for yourself. If you are uncomfortable with visits, express your needs for rest and suggest that people text, or send photos or videos instead. Express your

needs to keep visits short. Use this as opportunity to practice being compassionately assertive—having compassion for yourself and others.

Simple meditations

When we're not feeling well, we can do very simple, short meditations to help ease our anxiety. Also, such meditations can help alleviate pain. Mindfulness meditation has been shown in a recent study to reduce pain, which is consistent with findings that pain is shaped by experiences, expectations, and cognitive-affective states. Gabriel Riegner, Fadel Zeidan, et al., *Biol. Psychiatry*, 97(1):81-88 (Jan. 1 2025), referenced in *National Geographic*, vol. 245 No. 6, p. 46 (June 2024).

Practice just a moment of mindfulness here and there throughout your day. You can establish routines of mindfulness, such as being mindful just before you eat, as you eat, as you drink a beverage, while you take medication, and as you walk to and from the toilet.

Experiment with practicing mindfulness as you enter sleep or when you are given anesthesia.

Just before a medical procedure, or when you feel nervous or anticipate pain, visualize the Buddha, a Mahayana/Vajrayana deity, or your spiritual teacher standing near you, smiling and reassuring you.

You can look at a small statue or a picture of them on your cellphone.

You can also mentally chant a mantra, Buddhist stanza or prayer.

To ease tension when you feel uncomfortable, take an imaginary mindful walk in nature.

You can even practice this together with another person guiding you.

Imagine you are at favorite place in nature (beach, forest, lake, mountain, meadow, etc.)

Close your eyes and imagine the scenery, and all the things you would see all around you.

Try to see them clearly in your mind as you survey the scene.

Next, imagine what you would hear (ex: birds, wind, waves, splashing, rustling, insects).

Imagine what you would smell (ex: ocean, sand, pine, earth, lake water, grass, flowers, wood).

Imagine what you would feel, the tactile sensations (ex: wind, sun on skin, ground underneath).

Next, imagine that you pick up something in your hand such as a leaf, shell, stone, or caterpillar.

Visualize it clearly and imagine how it feels in your hand and as you move it on your fingers.

Or, try this variation, contemplating the five elements at your favorite place in nature:

earth/solid (for example, soil, sand, stones, mountain, trees);

water/liquid (for example, ocean, mist, moisture in soil, humidity, dew, river);

fire (for example, warmth, sun, stars, sparkle, all that you can see because of light);

air/movement (for example, wind, breath, rustling, bubbles, seeds dispersing, birds flying);

space (for example, sky, spaciousness, horizon, cave, hollow tree).

Try a healing visualization with an image of a candle flame. You can gaze at a real one or a picture of one on your cellphone, and then close your eyes to see it clearly in your mind.

Then imagine that the candle flame slowly moves to your forehead, and then enters inside your brain, illuminating your whole brain with a glow of soft white light, soothing, calming and healing the whole brain.

Then imagine the flame slowly moves down into your throat, and then down into your heart, soothing, relaxing and healing along the way with its warm glow.

Let the warm glow fill your chest cavity including the lungs, soothing, relaxing and healing the whole chest area.

Then slowly move the flame into your abdomen, where the glow of white light soothes, relaxes and heals each organ of the abdomen, one organ or one part of the abdomen at a time.

Let the glow linger for more time on parts of the body that are affected by the illness.

Then visualize the flame moving slowly down and back up each limb, one at a time, soothing, relaxing and healing.

Finally, imagine the whole body is full of light, soothed, relaxed and healed.

Deepen understanding of Buddhist principles

In the story, the Buddha taught that harmful actions—negative karmas—in a past life caused Tissa’s severe illness.

Yet the Buddha also has taught that karma is not the cause of all illnesses, but that there are other causes, such as imbalances in the body, poor diet, overeating and weather.

We sometimes don’t know the cause of an illness, and in any event, we must try to improve our health and recover from illness through medical treatment, other modes of healing, and appropriate care because, as the Buddha taught, health is our highest gain; our precious human life, and a clear mind, are the means to attain enlightenment.

Although we take our medication which fights the harmful microbes, bacteria, and viruses, we can think of them as our karmic creditors who are now taking sustenance from us as a result of our past actions; we’re now feeding them what we owe them.

Rather than hating them, we witness the process of disease and healing.

If the illness is terminal or doesn’t respond to any treatment, then the illness likely is the ripening of karma—its underlying cause is our negative action from a past life.

Karma is not a curse; it’s a purification, a release of something negative that we have done.

So, think positive: the illness is purifying my obscurations, exhausting my negative karma, and therefore, it’s a big step forward on the spiritual path.

Some people dread death so much that they feel tortured while they live their last days, especially when they believe that they have only one life.

Buddhists understand that human life is precious, but it’s only one life of countless lives.

Long life is not the goal; it’s what you do with your life that is important. As the Buddha taught, “It is better to spend one day virtuous and meditative than to live a hundred years immoral and uncontrolled” (Dhammapada 110).

Illness can help us learn not to be too attached to the body. When we're healthy, we enjoy its strength and youthfulness, which enables us to enjoy many activities and live independently. So, we have a degree of pride and attachment to our body. When we become seriously ill, that changes. We see its fragility, unreliability, impermanence. We see that we can't totally control the body—so then we understand more clearly that the body is not me, it's not who I am; the body is only a temporary vessel. Our pride in the body starts to diminish and we develop more humility.

When we're very ill, we might feel a lot of uncertainty—of diagnosis, treatment, prognosis, duration or severity of symptoms, life expectancy, changes in lifestyle, abilities or appearance. We see how things change, how they are impermanent.

And we see how things are dependent on so many factors; any one factor (an event, action, words, medication, mistake, kindness, assistance, visitor, roommate, etc.) affects countless other things. Contemplate that everything arises dependent on innumerable causes and conditions.

Also, we're more dependent on others while ill

These experiences give us a deeper understanding of the interdependence of all things.

We can contemplate that our body is composed of countless cells, gases, minerals, nutritive materials, waste materials, helpful and harmful microbes, and so forth, and now, disease.

Which particles are "me" and which are not "me"?

If we examine the body on a microscopic level, and then down to the subatomic level, where is the "I" among all this? Where is my "self"?

These insights can reduce our egoic individualism and lead us toward an understanding the Buddhist concept of no-self—that there is no unchanging, permanent self or essence in any phenomenon—which along with impermanence and suffering are the three characteristics of all existence.