

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 the 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.