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Transform Bad Circumstances into the Path

THERE'S AN OLD ZEN SAYING: *the whole world's upside down.* In other words, the way the world looks from the ordinary or conventional point of view is pretty much the opposite of the way the world actually is (at least as far as the Zen masters have conceived of it). There's a story that illustrates this. Once there was a Zen master called Bird's Nest Roshi because he meditated in an eagle's nest at the top of a tree. This was quite a dangerous thing to do: one gust of wind, one sleepy moment, and he was done for. He became quite famous for this precarious practice. The Song Dynasty poet Su Shih (who was also a government official) once came to visit him and, standing on the ground far below the meditating master, asked what possessed him to live in such a dangerous manner. The roshi answered, "You call this dangerous? What you are doing is far more dangerous!" Living normally in the world, ignoring death, impermanence, and loss and suffering, as we all routinely do, as if this were a normal and a safe way to live, is actually much more dangerous than going out on a limb to meditate.

As we have been saying, while trying to avoid difficulty may be natural and understandable, it actually doesn't work. We think it makes sense to protect ourselves from pain, but our self-protection ends up causing us deeper pain. We think we have to hold on to what we have, but our very holding on causes us to lose what we have. We're attached to what we like and try to avoid what we don't like, but we can't keep the attractive object and we can't avoid the unwanted object. So, counterintuitive though it may be, avoiding life's difficulties is actually not the path of least resistance: it is a dangerous way to live. If you want to have a full and happy life, in good times and bad, you have to get used to the idea that facing misfortune squarely is better than trying to escape from it.

This is not a matter of grimly focusing on life's difficulties. It is simply the smoothest possible approach to happiness. As we have already learned through the practice of sending and receiving, being willing to breathe in difficulty and transform it into healing, and even joy, is much better than fruitlessly trying to escape from it. Of course, when we can prevent difficulty, we do that. The world may be upside down, but we still have to live in this upside-down world, we have to be practical on its terms. So yes, we do reasonably try to protect our investments, get regular checkups, exercise, take care of our diet, get homeowner's insurance, and so on. Point three doesn't deny any of that. Instead, it addresses the underlying attitude of anxiety, fear, and narrow-mindedness that makes our lives unhappy, fearful, and small.

The practice of **Transforming bad circumstances into the path** is associated with the practice of patience, my all-time favorite spiritual quality. Patience is the capacity to welcome difficulty when it comes, with a spirit of strength, endurance, forbearance, and dignity rather than fear, anxiety, and avoidance. None of us likes to be oppressed or defeated, yet if we can endure oppression and defeat with strength, without whining, we are

ennobled by it. Patience makes this possible. Still, in our culture, we think of patience as passive and unglamorous. Other qualities like love or compassion or insight are much more popular. Naturally, we want the good stuff, the pleasant and inspiring stuff. But when tough times cause our love to fray into annoyance, our compassion to be overwhelmed by our fear, and our insight to evaporate, then patience begins to make sense. To me it is the most substantial, most serviceable, and most reliable of all spiritual qualities. Without it all other qualities are shaky.

The practice of patience is simple enough. When difficulty arises, notice the obvious and not so obvious ways we try to avoid it. The things we say and do, the subtle ways in which our very bodies recoil and clench when someone says or does something to us that we don't like. To practice patience is to simply notice these things and be fiercely present with them (taking a breath helps; returning to mindfulness of the body helps) rather than reacting to them and flailing around. Paying attention to body, paying attention to mind. And when possible, giving ourselves good teachings about the virtue of being with, rather than trying to run away from, the anguish we are feeling in this moment.

There are six slogans under this third point:

11. **Turn all mishaps into the path.**
12. **Drive all blames into one.**
13. **Be grateful to everyone.**
14. **See confusion as Buddha and practice emptiness.**
15. **Do good, avoid evil, appreciate your lunacy, pray for help.**
16. **Whatever you meet is the path.**

The first slogan, **Turn all mishaps into the path,** sounds at first blush completely impossible. How would you do that? When things go all right we are cheerful, we feel good and have

good spiritual feelings, but as soon as bad things start happening, we get depressed, we fall apart, or at the very best, we hang on and cope. We certainly do not transform our mishaps into the path. And why would we want to? We don't want the mishaps to be there, we want them gone as soon as possible. They are certainly not the path! The path is love and light, compassion, joy, and so on, we think.

But keep in mind that **Transform bad circumstances into the path** is the third point of mind training. It comes after the first slogan, **Train in the preliminaries,** which one presumably has done thoroughly, and after the practices of generating compassion, as we've discussed. Having established all of that, we have shaken up our conventional point of view. We are beginning to be more like the Bird's Nest Roshi than the poet below him, beginning to recognize that perhaps our habitual ways of thinking about our lives need to be reexamined. Also, we have been training in the practice of slogans, repeating them over and over, reflecting on them repeatedly, so that now they often pop up naturally, unbidden, when we need them. Now when something difficult or terrible happens to us, a loss, a setback, a frustration, an insult, naturally we immediately feel dismay or anger or disappointment or resentment just as everyone does, just as we always have—but now also a slogan pops into our minds, because we have trained ourselves in it. *Turn all of this into the path,* the slogan tells us.

So we practice patience: we catch ourselves running away and we reverse course, turning toward our afflictive emotions, understanding that they are natural in these circumstances but that avoiding them won't work and that there is no use blaming ourselves or wishing that things were otherwise. We know that this is how the human heart works, this is how we all are. We forestall our flailing around with these emotions and instead allow them to be present with dignity. We forgive ourselves for

having them, we forgive whoever we might be blaming for our difficulties, and with that spontaneous forgiveness comes a feeling of relief and even gratitude. We think: "Oh, yes, I really am angry right now, I am pretty upset right now, but this doesn't belong to me, this upset is what people feel under such conditions, and of course I feel this way. And I am grateful to feel what everyone feels under such conditions. I am glad to stand in solidarity and understanding with other human beings who are probably, right now, in this very moment, also feeling this."

This may strike you as a bit far-fetched, but it is not. Yet it does take training: we are, after all, not talking about miracles, we are not talking about affirmations or wishful thinking. We are talking about training the mind. If you were to meditate daily, bringing up this slogan, **Turn all mishaps into the path,** in your sitting, writing it down, repeating it many times a day, reflecting on it, reading the words of this book many times and thinking about them, then you could see that a change of heart and mind could take place in just the way I am describing. It simply makes sense. The mind and heart react according to their well-worn habits. Whatever habit of mind you have now comes from your actions and thoughts of the past (however unexamined or unintentional they may have been). Whatever habits of mind you will have in future depend on what you do or don't do from now on. The way you spontaneously react in times of trouble is not fixed. Your mind, your heart, can be trained. Once you have a single experience of reacting differently, you will be encouraged. Next time it is more likely that you will take yourself in hand. Each time becomes easier than the last. And little by little you establish a new habit. When something difficult happens, you will train yourself to stop saying, "Damn! Why did this have to happen!" and begin saying, "Yes, of course, this is how it is, let me turn toward it, let me practice with it, let me go beyond entanglement to gratitude." Because you will have realized that because

you are alive and not dead, because you have a human body and not some other kind of a body, because the world is a physical world and not an ethereal world, and because all of us together as people are the way we are, bad things are going to happen. It's the most natural, the most normal, the most inevitable thing in the world. It is not a mistake, and it isn't anyone's fault. And we can make use of it to drive our gratitude and our compassion deeper.

The second slogan under this third point of training the heart is famous: **Drive all blames into one.** It, too, is quite counterintuitive, quite upside down. What it is saying is: whatever happens, don't ever blame anyone or anything else, always blame only yourself. Eat the blame and it will make you strong.

There's another Zen story about this one. In Zen there's a formal eating ritual called *oryoki*. In Zen monasteries this is the way the monks eat all of their meals: in robes, seated on meditation cushions on raised platforms, with formal serving and chanting, eating in a dignified prescribed style, even washing out the bowls with water and wiping and putting them away as part of the ritual. When I was a monastic, I ate this way every day, and even now at some of our retreats we practice oryoki. At first the practice seems intimidating and overly complicated, but when you do it for a while, it becomes second nature and you see its beauty. You realize that actually it is the simplest, most elegant, and most efficient way that a group of people could eat together. In a way, it is a bit like mind training itself: it seems at first impossible and complicated, but when you get used to it, you see how beautiful and even how simple and natural it is.

In any case, once in ancient China an abbot was eating oryoki style with the monks in the meditation hall. He discovered a snake head in his soup. This was not snake soup; Zen monasteries are vegetarian. It was definitely a mistake. Probably a farmer monk out in the fields hadn't noticed that he'd cut off the head of a snake while cutting the greens, and the snake's head had found its way into the soup pot because the soup-cook monk also hadn't noticed it. Such things happen, even when you are practicing mindfulness and doing good organic farming and trying not to kill anything. But a mistake is a mistake, and a mistake that ends up in the abbot's bowl is a mistake compounded. The abbot called the *tenzo,* the head cook. "Look!" He held up the snake's head. And the tenzo, without saying a word, snatched the snake's head and swallowed it. He didn't blame the farmer, he didn't blame the soup cook. He didn't make excuses. He didn't feel guilty or ashamed. He ate the blame. It was probably very nourishing.

Drive all blames into one is tricky because blaming ourselves, which seems to be what the slogan is recommending, is not exactly blaming ourselves in the ordinary sense. We know perfectly well how to blame ourselves. We've been doing this all of our lives, it is commonplace; we are constantly feeling guilty about everything, and if we are not guilty, we are ashamed. We don't need Buddhist slogans to tell us to do this. But clearly this is not what is meant.

Drive all blames into one means that you can't blame anyone for what happens, even if it's actually someone's fault, like the farmer's or the soup cook's. It may be their fault, but you really can't blame them. Something happened, and since it did, there is nothing else to be done but to make use of it. Everything that happens, disastrous as it may be, and no matter whose fault it is, has a potential benefit, no matter how bad it may seem at first. That's the nature of something happening, that it has a potential benefit, and it's your job to find out how to turn it into a benefit. **Drive all blames into one** means that you take the full