



Dolpo Tulku Rinpoche Teachings

Taking Illness As A Path of Dharma

Today, I wish to talk to you about how we can use 'illness' as a part of our spiritual path. I will examine six points:

1. Bringing the acute feeling of suffering to a halt.
2. Thinking of suffering as a karmic result.
3. Overcoming attachment through renunciation.
4. Developing the inner strength of compassion.
5. Training ourselves in viewing happiness and suffering as illusory.
6. How we can use deities and demons as our support.

1. Bringing The Acute Feeling Of Suffering To A Halt

Generally, when we have an acute feeling of happiness or suffering we become very sensitive. If we are too sensitive, however, we should change this. If we are overwhelmed by our suffering, we have become too focused on it. Subsequently, questions like "why do I have this illness?" occur. Not only that, we keenly notice the behavior of the people around us: wondering why someone doesn't come to see us; doesn't bring us flowers; or why our nurses and carers act in a certain way. We suddenly take everything so personally.

Sometimes when we are more relaxed, even when someone hurts us in a small way, we don't feel it. It simply doesn't bother us. But if we are very aware of our feelings, we can become so touchy! Some yoga practitioners have a tendency towards this. They want to be quiet. Always wanting to relax their bodies, their shoulders etc. They are just so 'thin-skinned'. These yoga practitioners cannot stay in a noisy area or a big city any longer. Of course, it is good for their health, all yoga exercises are very beneficial on a physical level, but mentally they can become rather narrow. I shouldn't perhaps say 'narrow', but instead, very sensitive. Sometimes this can cause a lot of unhappy feelings or unease.

Therefore when we are sick, it is better to redirect our mind, and stop being too aware of what we are feeling or what is happening, or why someone is not coming etc. When a sick person is too critical towards his surroundings, he will make everyone feel very uncomfortable. Should he be sick for a long time, his carers may very well tire of tending him. Not because they have to come so often, but because they become tired of their patient's overly sensitive attitude. Being too touchy isn't helpful to either the sick person or to anyone else. So the first point to note, is to find ways to stop this acute feeling of illness.

2. Thinking Of Suffering As A Karmic Result

Firstly, I want to describe the meaning of 'karma' in an easy way. The word karma comes from Sanskrit. If used in English we need some additional explanation, otherwise we will not use it correctly.

I once visited Australia, and someone took me to a very nice restaurant where the owner warmly welcomed me and asked: "Please, could you give me some good karma for the success of this business?" I replied very politely "Yes, why not?". We had a nice dinner and during it, I started thinking about why it was that I told him that I would give him good karma. Could I really do that? Of course not! So I went over to talk to him to explain that the success of the restaurant depended on his karma, meaning his actions of body, speech and mind. If he made a very good business plan, trained his staff well for example, then these actions - or in other words this karma - would make his business a success. My personal wishes would have no influence.

The meaning of karma is 'action of body, speech and mind'. It is not something separate from those things. Sometimes people talk about karma in the way that there is a bank where we put all our good and bad deeds, and after a while we get them back but with some interest. It's not like that. Karma means action, but, the meaning is closer to 'work and worker'. There are these words in Sanskrit and Tibetan for work and worker. You should directly think of karma as the action of body, speech and mind. So when you are working for a centre, the principle is that your action is doing something for the centre.

From the point of view of a sick person, the prominent question is 'Why is this only happening to me?'. Sometimes the person thinks that it just can't be possible this is happening to him. And he gets very depressed, because he cannot accept the reality of being ill. But this can happen to everyone. Illness is part of life. We cannot avoid such things. So instead of being afraid of illness, it is better to accept it. When you accept something it is quite easy to deal with it. In our lives, we see that when we are trying to deal with something and we confront the situation, we can actually do something about it. So in regard to an illness like cancer, which cannot be cured by doctors or medicine or other things, it may be the case that someone becomes very overwhelmed. But during our lives, we all go through several illnesses. Sometimes we recover with the help of medication, change of diet, by exercising, or with the help of a doctor. Sometimes we don't. That's how it is. We can't change that. These situations I believe are karmic results.

So when we think this is a karmic result, what does that mean? There is then a chance, an opportunity, to change our karma. Because when we see and accept that illness is the result of karma, we can change our way of thinking. We can look at our negative past actions and resolve to change our character. Maybe we become more helpful to others. If, when checking our life, we find that we harmed others without having any compassion or we refused even the smallest request with an angry face, we need to just understand that. Now, we have a wonderful chance to change all those negative actions.

In Buddhism we always say everything is impermanent. That means there is always the possibility to change! Nothing has to stay 'bad' but can be changed for the better. Impermanence gives us the confidence that we can change. Impermanence depends on causes and conditions so when we change those causes and conditions, it is possible that we become someone who is helpful. Therefore when we have such an illness we shouldn't wonder why we got sick or even feel guilty. There is no point in dwelling on such thoughts. We should rather look take the perspective of impermanence. Then we comprehend that we have a good chance to change.

3. Overcoming Attachment Through Renunciation

Renunciation is the antidote to attachment. When we have too many desires, we suffer. I don't have to explain how this causes a lot of suffering. We all have personal experience with attachment towards a boyfriend, a girlfriend, work or being in a nice location. Therefore I want to share with you a story about a great practitioner named Patrul Rinpoche. He wrote the book "Words of My Perfect Teacher". I highly recommend it. He was a great practitioner and he did not care about fame or wealth. One day, somebody offered him a piece of gold. Generally he went to many places without carrying anything valuable with him. He had almost no possessions. But then, he received this piece of gold, and he tucked it away very nicely under his pillow at night. He was actually very poor and had no desire for material things and wealth. But somehow this piece of gold got to him and he started checking and checking during the night whether the piece of gold was still in its place. This behaviour irritated him, so he asked himself what was the benefit of the gold to him? It seemed to destroy his very nice sleep more than it benefitted him in any way. When he realised this, he just gave the gold away to someone and slept soundly again. This story shows how attachment makes us unhappy.

I also want to share one of my own experiences. When I travel to different countries I also have the chance to go shopping in nice big shopping malls. Usually I don't feel any desire to buy anything. Subconsciously I know and accept that all the nice designer clothes like T-shirts and pants etc. are not for me. But sometimes I see something I really want. Then I think, "Oh, this is a very nice T-shirt. It looks very good, maybe I should get one?". Then I look at the price and see that I can't afford it. Even though I can't buy it, I have some craving for it. So when I come out of the shopping centre, I

didn't really enjoy my time there. It is neither a happy nor an unhappy feeling, but I feel like something is missing.

Of course, it's very clear that I wanted the T-shirt or whatever, which I couldn't have, and that left me feeling dissatisfied. This has happened from time to time. But the most difficult place for me is in an optician's. There I really suffer a lot! Subconsciously I can't accept that I can't have many, many glasses. All levels of my consciousness are focused on the nice frames, on looking at the design and trying to choose the nicest one. Then I look at the price and I really can't afford those beautiful frames because they are so expensive. So I'm stuck there. Attachment binds us mentally to the desired object.

When we look again at the situation of a sick person, it is very important to practice renunciation. Sometimes we can't think about how to begin to be a better person. We suffer because we are attached to our wealth, partner or projects. We get so frustrated. Often I have to visit sick people and the most difficult thing is guiding them to loosen their attachment to their family or their wealth. That is very hard. It can happen to us as well. Therefore we have to be aware of this, and we have to start from now on to contemplate that death can happen anytime. One should think "now I should do my best to help other people, to do something good". But when the time comes, we should be ready to cut our attachment to the rest of the family, our possessions and our partner. Then our parting can be very peaceful. I have a lot of experience in this and have witnessed these situations many times. So please, we have to be ready from this moment on. Nobody can change that we will die. It is reality. So when we accept that, we can be prepared.

4) Developing The Inner Strength Of Compassion

We know we need compassion. Everyone knows that. Yet sometimes we forget to check how we can develop compassion. Compassion arises from empathy. Another word for empathy is the understanding of others. Without it there is no way to develop compassion. So we have to know these different psychological steps. Compassion is rooted in the understanding of other beings. If we want to be a compassionate person, an altruistic person, we must develop our empathy. It doesn't just mean to find something cute and attractive. It means to care for someone or something without depending on its form or how it looks or how attractive it is. We can do that by cultivating an understanding that all other beings are the same as us in the sense that they want to avoid suffering and to achieve happiness. On this level we are all the same. I believe that this understanding of equality is the one and only thing that will bring peace to the world. Therefore we have to develop understanding for other beings. The kind of understanding that goes a lot deeper than the cuteness or attractiveness of someone. It looks deeper into factors like culture, religion, history etc. and the importance they have for us.

The prayers in my religion bring me inner peace, and the prayers of another religion bring inner peace to its followers. What could give me the right to destroy their feeling

of peacefulness? With this kind of deep empathy or understanding we develop true compassion.

So how can someone who is ill, and who is constantly thinking: “Why is this happening to me? I am suffering so much” practice? When he thinks that way, he may even want others to suffer as well. At that point he has no compassion. So instead of this train of thought, we should look for better ways to think. It is better to think the pain is so severe, no one should ever have to experience this.

We can pray from the depth of our heart, because we know what it feels like. We wish no being falls ill in this way. This gives rise to deep compassion. We can wish that all this suffering ripens in us, so it gets exhausted, and as a result, no one else will face this in the future.

If we witness the difficulties of others, we immediately know what they are going through and spontaneously we feel empathetic towards them. This greater mental attitude actually helps us to overcome the acute feeling of illness. You know, sometimes when we take on a big responsibility for others our mind and energy gets stronger, because we are not only acting on our own behalf, but for a larger group. We become more courageous. Therefore when we get seriously ill, we shouldn't hide under a blanket feeling sorry, because this is such a terrible feeling. Instead, think of your mother, your father and all your friends. When we think that way, including all living beings and making them the object of our compassion and empathy, automatically our prayers and practices become very powerful. But not with the motivation of “I better pray for everyone, so I will recover very soon.” Not like that. Think of all beings with great empathy and compassion. When we have compassion we automatically do something beneficial for them. For example our parents do everything for us. They don't have to plan for it. They don't have to push themselves. Why? This is because they only have love and compassion for us. They have great empathy. So whenever we get sick, we have to pray for all beings as if they were our own children. That will give us a lot of strength and energy.

Of course I don't need to repeat all the scientific data showing the benefits of compassion and a bigger mind. Tests showed that those people who practice meditation, love and compassion responded well and recovered faster through their medical treatment, whereas others who do not practice mediation, love and compassion face more difficulty. I won't talk more about this data since you know it better than me!

5) Training Ourselves In Viewing Happiness And Suffering As Illusory

This is a very good subject, especially for those who have a very serious illness, and for those who are dying or are in the process of dying. This practice is very important. Why? Because everything is eventually an illusion. What is the meaning of illusion? Sometimes we are judging an object as good or bad, right or wrong, pleasant or unpleasant etc. These judgments can be based on our religion and culture, on what we learned in school

and university, on our life experience and on many other factors. We designate one name and one meaning to an experience and then we believe that. That's the foundation of causes and conditions of our negative thoughts.

For example, this statue of Manjushri, which is a deity symbolising wisdom. You in the audience think this is in front, but I think it is in the back. When we analyse it, we might think that its position depends on our point of view. But normally, we don't consider different view points. We just believe our own. So you would think, the statue is in front and I am convinced I am right and anyone saying anything else is wrong. These are the simple illustrations of how we create our world. How we judge objects. Another example is eating by hand. In India it is good to eat by hand. Here in the US it is considered very impolite. Who is right? Who can say whether eating with hands is good or bad? It just depends. In reality, good or bad, polite or impolite has nothing to do with using one's hands to eat no matter how strongly we believe in our one interpretation. That is the meaning of illusion. We project something and we believe it. That combination creates suffering. We can't free ourselves from our judgment, the thinking of right or wrong. Reality is not like that, it transcends our judgment. If we understand this deeply, we can achieve inner peace.

Therefore when we experience pain, when we are in the process of dying, our sensory faculties get weaker. The illness destroys them. Sometimes we hear and see things that scare us. At that moment we need to remember our practice that all experiences are illusions. They are not inherently scary, we just interpret them that way. Remember that when you are in the hospital and in the process of dying. Be at peace and don't let your thoughts get swept away by feelings and judgments. Then you can free yourself from them. If you have a good meditation practice, use it as a support to release judgments. That's a very important practice.

6) How We Can Use Deities And Demons As Our Support

Some of you may think that this topic is a very religious topic. Yes, of course it is. But if we look at it from a perspective of social science, we see that many people believe in deities and demons. And those who believe in this, think that demons create illness or obstacles in life.

There is some truth in this. A few days ago the resident Buddhist practitioners at the Upaya Centre here practiced a dedication to hungry ghosts. This is the same thing. We think that deities and demons are harming us. So we should harm them in return, destroy them and then we will be fine. But that approach has nothing to do with compassion. Here I'm talking of how to support them, how we can befriend them. That's the main point. With our enemies it's the same. If we talk to them, they can become our friend, even our best friend. Also, based on compassion, instead of regarding demons as harmful, we can view them in a friendly and open way, finding out how to serve them and give them what they need. Therefore this is a generosity practice. We talk about four objects of generosity:

1. Buddha and Bodhisattvas.
2. Dharma protectors, meaning also spirits supporting the good in the world.
3. All sentient beings.
4. Those beings with whom we have special connections due to karmic results or debts, demons or enemies.

We should invite all with love and compassion. After the practice, we should dedicate to them and wish that they will receive whatever they need.

This is the best way to turn our enemies into our supporters.

This evening I actually don't know why I decided to talk about this topic. We needed a title for the talk, so I gave this topic. But then I started to think about it and wondered how will I ever talk about all of the six points? But by then it had already been announced! So there it is. Thank you for your attention and very kind ears.

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