

Reversing the Wheel of Samsara

Usually we feel that there's a large problem and we have to fix it. The instruction is to stop. Do something unfamiliar. Do anything besides rushing off in the same old direction, up to the same old tricks.

SOMEHOW we keep distancing ourselves from the dharma. It's as if we regard it as philosophy or a crash course in self-improvement, and no matter how often we are encouraged to make meditation and the teachings relevant to our emotional life, we continue to forget to apply it when we get stuck. When we are angry with someone or broken-hearted, when we want to get even or commit suicide, at times like these we don't seem to think meditation or the teachings quite cut the mustard. They don't quite speak to the realness of the situation.

Many people say that meditation is not enough, that we need therapy and support groups to deal with our most stuck patterns. They feel strongly that the dharma doesn't quite penetrate our confusion deeply enough.

I often suggest therapy for a student. I see it as a specific skillful means that for some people is extremely helpful. For some of us, working closely with a nonjudgmental therapist allows us to overcome our fears and finally develop loving-kindness for ourselves. At the same time, I know that not only is the dharma more revolutionary, but also that for many of us, the dharma itself supplies the tools and support we need to find our own beauty, our own insight, our own ability to work with neurosis and pain. One of the tricks seems to be having enough faith in the dharma to bring it right into our nightmares, not as an unusable theory that distances us from our major issues or something we're meant to measure up to, but as good food, no-side-effects medicine that is applicable always and everywhere.

The key is changing our habits and, in particular, the habits of our mind. I remember the day I understood without question that we create our situation by how we use our mind, by how we keep patterning our responses to life in the same old, very dusty, utterly predictable way. A situation came up about money. We were running out of money. I began to get tense. I felt as if a huge weight were literally sitting on my head. I began to panic. I had to find a way out. Until I found a way to solve this problem, I could not relax. I couldn't enjoy the sunshine on the water or the eagle sitting in a tree right outside my window.

The whole thing was hauntingly familiar. Why

I caught it this time more dramatically than ever before, I don't know. Probably it was a result of all the years of looking as honestly and uncritically as I could at my experience. Possibly it was also a result of all the meditation training I had done in seeing when I'd spin off and then just coming back to the present.

At any rate, that day I caught it. Right there in the middle of a very habitual state of mind, I saw what I was doing. I not only saw what I was doing, I also stopped. I stopped following through with my habitual plan to save the day. I decided not to rush around trying to avert disaster. I let the thoughts that "only I could rescue us" come and I let them go. I decided to see what would happen without my input—even if it meant that everything would fall apart. Sometimes you just have to let everything fall apart.

Stopping my actions was the first step and the hardest one. Not saving the day was going against the grain of how I operated. I felt like there was a huge wheel that had colossal momentum for going in a habitual direction, and I was turning it around.

That's what the dharma is about; turning all our habits around, reversing the process of how we make everything so solid, reversing the wheel of samsara. It starts with catching ourselves when we spin off in the same old ways. Usually we feel that there's a large problem and we have to fix it. The instruction is to stop. Do something unfamiliar. Do anything be-

sides rushing off in the same old direction, up to the same old tricks.

In the Buddhist teachings, there is a lot of instruction for turning reality around. One hears advice like “Meditate on whatever provokes resentment” and “Lean into the sharp points.” While Trungpa Rinpoche was still in Tibet, his teacher Khenpo Gangshar trained him in this style of living. He called it instruction in the nondual nature of reality. When we asked Rinpoche once what had happened to Khenpo Gangshar when they escaped from Tibet, he said he wasn’t sure but had heard that when the rest of them were escaping to India, Khenpo Gangshar was walking toward China.

This kind of instruction is something we can apply to our lives, and it can bring about revolutionary changes in how we perceive things.

My first step was to decide I wasn’t going to *act* on my habitual momentum. It was a test, an exploration of the Buddhist teaching that says we create our own reality, that what we perceive is our own projection.

Everything in me was dying to do the same old thing. But I kept remembering the teachings that say that until we stop clinging to the concept of good and evil, the world will continue to manifest as friendly goddesses and harmful demons. I wanted to explore whether this was true or not.

I could experiment this way without becoming rigid or harsh because of the training I’d had in

making friends with my thoughts and emotions. Somehow, without cultivating unlimited friendliness for ourselves, we don't progress along the path. When we meditate and when we hear the teachings, it helps to remember that we are engaged in developing kindness.

One time when I was teaching in Austin, Texas, a man came up to me after the weekend and told me how much he appreciated the instruction to notice our tone of voice when we label our thoughts "thinking" and, if it's harsh, to say it again with gentleness. "I really took that to heart," he said, "and now when my mind wanders off, I just say to myself, 'Thinkin', good buddy.'"

Still, even after many years, many of us continue to practice harshly. We practice with guilt, as if we're going to be excommunicated if we don't do it right. We practice so we won't be ashamed of ourselves and with fear that someone will discover what a "bad" meditator we really are. The old joke is that a Buddhist is someone who is either meditating or feeling guilty about not meditating. There's not much joy in that.

Maybe the most important teaching is to lighten up and relax. It's such a huge help in working with our crazy mixed-up minds to remember that what we're doing is unlocking a softness that is in us and letting it spread. We're letting it blur the sharp corners of self-criticism and complaint.

Some of us can accept others right where they are a lot more easily than we can accept ourselves. We feel that compassion is reserved for someone else, and it never occurs to us to feel it for ourselves.

My experience is that by practicing without “shoulds,” we gradually discover our wakefulness and our confidence. Gradually, without any agenda except to be honest and kind, we assume responsibility for being here in this unpredictable world, in this unique moment, in this precious human body.

Finally I came to that moment when I was ready to slow down the habitual momentum of my mind and stop being so predictable. I began with not acting in the familiar way. It felt difficult. There was such a huge longing to solve the problem, what Trungpa Rinpoche called “nostalgia for samsara.” But my curiosity about the teachings was stronger than the yearning to do what I’d always done. Here I was stepping into no-man’s-land. Here I was feeling shaky. It was real, not some lofty theory I’d read in a book. I didn’t know what would happen next, but anything was preferable to reacting in the same stuck way.

Every act counts. Every thought and emotion counts too. This is all the path we have. This is where we apply the teachings. This is where we come to understand why we meditate. We are only going to be here for a short while. Even if we live to be 108, our life will be too short for witnessing all its wonders. The dharma is each act, each thought, each

word we speak. Are we at least willing to catch ourselves spinning off and to do that without embarrassment? Do we at least aspire to not consider ourselves a problem, but simply a pretty typical human being who could at that moment give him- or herself a break and stop being so predictable?

My experience is that this is how our thoughts begin to slow down. Magically, it seems that there's a lot more space to breathe, a lot more room to dance, and a lot more happiness.

The dharma can heal our wounds, our very ancient wounds that come not from original sin but from a misunderstanding so old that we can no longer see it. The instruction is to relate compassionately with where we find ourselves and to begin to see our predicament as workable. We are stuck in patterns of grasping and fixating which cause the same thoughts and reactions to occur again and again and again. In this way we project our world. When we see that, even if it's only for one second every three weeks, then we'll naturally discover the knack of reversing this process of making things solid, the knack of stopping the claustrophobic world as we know it, putting down our centuries of baggage, and stepping into new territory.

If you ask how in the world we can do this, the answer is simple. Make the dharma personal, explore it wholeheartedly, and relax.