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In order to receive any genuine transformation we have to transform everything we do, everything we say, everything we think, to the utmost of our ability, into a Dharma practice. If we use every action of body, speech and mind as our practice, by cultivating awareness, being present in the moment, seeing things with clarity and understanding, opening our heart in kindness and in love, thinking about other people and how they feel, then there is certainty that there will be a transformation. But if we think that Dharma practice is only what we do when we go to a Dharma centre or when some Lama is visiting, when we go to Dharma talks or we sit and meditate together or do some puja, if we think that is Dharma practice and the rest of the day is just so much extra time, then there will never, even after an aeon of time, be any transformation.

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We have this precious life now. This is our opportunity. If we let it go, who knows if the opportunity will ever come again.

But it's not enough just to intellectually understand. We have to take the Dharma and use it. We have to take the Dharma and eat it and digest it until it permeates every cell of our bodies. What use is it unless it really takes over our life, unless we and the Dharma merge? Without this, it's just another -ism amongst all the many other different ways of doing and looking at things. At this moment, our mind is in one place and the Dharma is in another and they're looking at each other. Occasionally they touch. But that's not enough. They have to become like one, so that it's impossible to see which is one's mind and which is the Dharma. It's like a dye going into a cloth: the mind has to be completely dyed with the Dharma so that every word, every thought, every action is an expression of our understanding of the way things really are.

In the beginning this is not so easy. We have to work at it, we have to be mindful, and we have to remind ourselves. That is what is meant by perseverance. It means moment to moment to moment, to the very best of our abilities, whatever situation comes up, we must really try to bring our intelligence and our heart into that situation. If we have that attentiveness in the moment then everything that happens to us will have some meaning. It will be an opportunity to make some progress on the path. This gives us tremendous freedom because whatever happens can help us. The Tibetan texts say that we should use all occasions as aids on the path. If we believe this then it doesn't matter what happens to us because whatever occurs we can transform into an aid on the path and so there is freedom.

But freedom from what? From hope and fear. This goes back to having a mind that is very open and spacious. When we talk about effort we don't mean huffing and puffing as though you're in a marathon race. What we're talking about is a very spacious effort, a very constant alertness in the moment; type of effort. It's just flowing like a river, from moment to moment to moment. It's not doing push-ups, although sometimes push-ups and prostrations might be called for! It's the effort to be here and now and to have a relaxed, open, alert mind which responds appropriately and with clarity to whatever is happening. Usually we are so absorbed in our own desires, our own thoughts and feelings that we can't see things very clearly. What's needed is to be able to step back and have this openness to see things as they really are and therefore to respond in an appropriate manner. The ability to do this, to integrate this with our life completely, is what is meant by effort.

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The other application of this is what the Buddha called, I think, the four right efforts. These are: the effort to prevent the unwholesome from arising, the effort to discard that unwholesomeness which has already arisen, the effort to create the wholesome which has not yet arisen, and the effort to cultivate and maintain that wholesomeness which has arisen.

Wholesomeness, sometimes also translated as skillfulness, means those states of mind such as understanding, love, generosity and openness of heart which create within us and around us a state of harmony and peace. This is in contrast to the unwholesome, or unskilful, states of mind such as ignorance, greed and aversion which create within us and without us states of conflict. So, part of maintaining our awareness is to be aware of the states of our mind and where they are coming from. We must have discernment. We have to recognise those thoughts and emotions that are rooted in the negative factors. It's not a matter of suppression; it's a matter of recognising them, accepting them and letting them go. We don't follow them. We don't maintain them, we don't follow them.

As our awareness grows so we become more acutely conscious of our mental states and then we can see, for example,
when aversion, when anger is coming into our mind. We can recognise it. We can even name it and say 'This is anger.' But we don’t identify with it. We just see that this is an angry state of mind. We accept that what it is. But in knowing that it’s not helpful, we can also drop it. On the other hand, sometimes very positive states of mind arise and because we are so busy we don’t recognise them and therefore they fade away. If the mind is clear then when positive states of mind come, again we can recognise them, we can acknowledge them and we can try to help them remain, to grow, to be appreciated. So, it’s not just a matter of blaming ourselves for all our negative thoughts. There’s no blame here. It’s recognising what is and being able to let go. And when it’s positive, it’s recognising it and encouraging it. It’s dealing with knowing, knowing what is in the mind, without getting caught in our conflicts.

It’s not helpful to have the mind as a battlefield. Shantideva writes about using the mind as a battlefield and wielding the sword of discrimination to destroy all the negative factors of the mind. But that is not really helpful because, especially in the West, people start blaming themselves, castigating themselves, feeling guilty and getting caught up in a lot of conflict. “Oh, I’m such a bad person, I always was such a bad person, I always will be such a bad person.” Using the mind as a battlefield against oneself is not in any way psychologically useful.

Better than that is just to see the thoughts and feelings as they arise. Recognise them for what they are, accept them and, if they are not useful, let them go. Even better than that, of course, is to recognise their empty, transparent nature because if we recognise that then, of themselves, they will transform into a kind of intelligence.

It is actually better on the spiritual path to be a tiger than a rabbit.

In themselves, negative emotions are not necessarily a bad thing. Even such strong emotions as anger, jealousy and desire are, at their very root, an energy. If we allow them to channel out through negative channels then, of course, this creates a lot of conflict and turmoil. But if we can see them in their true nature, then we get back to their energy source and it transforms into a very deep and profound energy – intelligence.

Therefore it is actually better on the spiritual path to be a tiger than a rabbit. Rabbits are very nice and they are quite cuddly and cute but what do they do? There you are, a nice little rabbit twitching your nose, but there’s no power there, there’s no force so, spiritually speaking, it’s not very helpful. It might be very pleasant to live with rabbits, but they have no drive. However, someone with very strong emotions, like a tiger, can be very destructive if left in the wild, but if they can learn to harness those emotions then that becomes the drive to enlightenment.

That is why the greatest practitioners in Tibet were usually Kampa. The Kampas of Eastern Tibet were, left in their natural state, quite wild. They were bandits and brigands. They were known by the more effete central Tibetans as very wild and woolly. But those very rough and quite violent people made the very greatest practitioners because when they channelled that energy into a spiritual path nothing stopped them.

Using the mind as a battlefield against oneself is not in any way psychologically useful.

So, it’s not our emotions, even our negative emotions, which are the problem. The problem is whether they control us or we control them. The best way to control is through seeing and the best way to see is through developing awareness. Once we are conscious and aware of our emotions, of our motivations, then we have the wish-fulfilling gem in our hands and everything can be transformed. As long as we are unknowing, as long as we are identified with our thoughts and emotions, as long as we are controlled by our thoughts and emotions, we are slaves. So it’s amatter of learning how to master the mind. Who is going to be in control here? Our emotions or us? (Whatever it is, we’re talking on a relative level here!)

Most of us are complete slaves to our emotions and thoughts. When we are angry, we are the anger. When we are jealous, we are the jealousy. When we are depressed, we are the depression. We are complete slaves to our desires, our angers, our aversions, our jealousies, our hopes and our fears. We’re not in control at all.

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The Buddha said that someone who kills a thousand times a thousand men on the battlefield is nothing compared with one who is master of himself.

First, we have to learn to be in control of our own minds. After all, our mind is the closest thing we have; it’s how we perceive everything. External circumstances are nothing compared to the internal circumstances of our mind. So if we want to benefit ourselves and others, we have to get our mind into some kind of shape. The easiest and quickest way to do that is to develop this moment-to-moment awareness of the mind. By doing this we can find the space to see what is happening within us and to select that which is helpful. That which is not helpful, we can drop. All our Dharma practices are directed towards attaining this mastery and understanding. First we have to understand then, through that
understanding, we can gain mastery.

The Buddha said that someone who kills a thousand times a thousand men on the battlefield is nothing compared with one who is master of himself. He who conquers himself is the greatest warrior. So we have to learn to conquer ourselves. But we don’t conquer ourselves by creating an inner battlefield; we conquer ourselves through developing understanding, insight and awareness. This takes enormous effort because the inertia of our mind is so deep, so entrenched.

Sometimes people ask me what I gained from living for so many years in a cave. I say, "It’s not what I gained, it’s what I lost."

I have talked about how genuine renunciation is to give up all our fond thoughts; daydreams, memories of the past, anticipations of the future, the inner mental chatter and commentaries with which most of us live our days and which keep us both stressed and entertained. To drop that as much as we can and to live nakedly in the present, just with what is happening in the moment, is very difficult. We are so attached to our memories, our daydreams, our fantasies and our interpretations. We think that they are who we are. We think that they are what make our life so rich. But in fact, they are exactly who we are not and they impoverish our inner life because we are caught up more and more in delusion. To drop all that, to really drop it as much as we possibly can, is a powerful practice. That is the greatest renunciation. It requires enormous application at the beginning because there’s tremendous resistance in the mind to being in the present, to just being with what IS, rather than with all our fantasies and projections about how we want life to be. Just seeing life as it is, without any of our commentaries is very hard. For example, when I look at an object, I immediately start thinking of others I’ve seen which were similar, of whether I like the shape or don’t like the shape, of whether the workmanship is good or not good, of how I might have wanted one which was somewhat different. This goes on infinitely; elaborating, elaborating, and elaborating until we don’t see the object at all any more.

First, you have to empty out the cup and clean it, and then you can pour in the ambrosia.

This might not seem very important. But when we relate it to situations, to people we know and with whom we interrelate, then these layers upon layers of opinions, interpretations, elaborations and memories distance us from what is actually happening, who is actually in front of us, what is actually occurring inside ourselves. Dharma practice is not a matter of learning more and more and studying more and more, although that can also be important. It’s not a matter of adding more and more; it’s a matter of emptying out, peeling off layer after layer. We’re already so full of junk, so stuffed to the top, that first we need to empty out.

A great Thai master was once asked what his main problem was with people who came to him for instruction. He said that the main problem with them was that they were already so full of their own ideas and opinions, they were like a cup filled to the brim with dirty water. You can’t pour anything on top because if you do, it will just become dirty too. First, you have to empty out the cup and clean it, and then you can pour in the ambrosia. And so, for us too, we need to clear out; we need to add more at this time. We need to start peeling off all our opinions, all our ideas, and all our cleverness and just remain very naked, in the moment, just seeing things as they are, like a small child.

If we do that then it gives some space for the innate intelligence to which we are all heirs to surface. And with that intelligence comes a genuine openness of heart. But if we try to do all these practices on top of all the junk which we already have in our mind, nothing is ever affected. We just distort; no real transformation will take place.

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Sometimes people ask me what I gained from living for so many years in a cave. I say, "It’s not what I gained, it’s what I lost." I think that in Dharma practice it is very important first to really have a period of dropping rather than building up. This is why a practice like Samatha, just quietly sitting, can be so very, very beneficial because it gives us space to begin to peel off and empty out. But also, during the day, as much as you can, try to bring the mind back into the present and try to see things as if one is seeing them for the very first time. This is especially valuable with people one is very connected to -- one’s spouse or one’s children, one’s colleagues at work. Try to look at them as if seeing them for the very first time with completely fresh, new eyes.

Moment to moment, we are. After a while we become so heavily habituated we can’t see any more. All we see are our own ideas and impressions and memories. It’s very important that we should practice now so that at the time of our death we can think, "Well, I tried. I did the best I could and so I can die without regrets."