

Life is Tough. Here Are Six Ways to Deal With It

by Norman Fischer

An ancient set of Buddhist slogans offers us six powerful techniques to transform life's difficulties into awakening and benefit. Zen teacher Norman Fischer guides us through them.

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. There's a story that illustrates this.

Once there was a Zen master who was called Bird's Nest Roshi because he meditated in an eagle's nest at the top of a tree. 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.

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. Of course, when we can prevent difficulty, we do it. The world may be upside down, but we still have to live in this upside-down world, and we have to be practical on its terms. The teaching on transforming bad circumstances into the path doesn't deny that. What it addresses is the underlying attitude of anxiety, fear, and narrow-mindedness that makes our lives unhappy, fearful, and small.

Transforming bad circumstances into the path is associated with the practice of patience. There are six mind-training (lojong) slogans connected with this:

1. Turn all mishaps into the path.
2. Drive all blames into one.
3. Be grateful to everyone.
4. See confusion as buddha and practice emptiness.
5. Do good, avoid evil, appreciate your lunacy, pray for help.
6. Whatever you meet is the path.

1. Turn All Mishaps Into 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 alright we are cheerful—we feel good and have positive 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.

We are not talking about miracles. We are talking about training the mind.

Yet, the slogan tells us, we can turn all of this into the path. We do that by practicing 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. In our culture, we think of patience as passive and unglamorous; other qualities like love or compassion or insight are much more popular. 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 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. We catch ourselves running away and we reverse course, turning toward our afflictive emotions, understanding that they are natural in these circumstances—and that avoiding them won't work. 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 (at least provisionally) whoever we might be blaming for our difficulties, and with that spontaneous forgiveness comes a feeling of relief and even gratitude.

This may strike you as a bit far-fetched, but it is not. Yet it does take training. We are not, after all, 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, then you could see that a change of heart and mind can take place in just the way I am describing. 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, and next time it is more likely that you will take yourself in hand. 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.

2. Drive All Blames Into One

The second slogan on transforming difficult circumstances 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.

This is tricky, because it is not exactly blaming ourselves in the ordinary sense. We know perfectly well how to blame ourselves. We've been doing it all of our lives. 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, 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, and it's your job to find it. *Drive all blames into one* means that you take full responsibility for everything that arises in your life.

This is very bad, this is not what I wanted, this brings many attendant problems. But what am I going to do with it? What can I learn from it? How can I make use of it for the path? These are the questions to ask, and answering them is entirely up to you. Furthermore, you can answer them; you do have the strength and the capacity. *Drive all blames into one* is a tremendous practice of cutting through the long human habit of complaining and whining, and finding on the other side of it the strength to turn every situation into the path. Here you are. This is it. There is no place else to go but forward into the next moment. Repeat the slogan as many times as you have to.

3. Be Grateful to Everyone

Be grateful to everyone: this is very simple but very profound.

My wife and I have a grandson. We went to visit him when he was about six weeks old. He couldn't do anything, not even hold up his head, much less feed himself. If he was in trouble, he couldn't ask for help. Unable to do anything on his own, he was completely dependent on his mother's care and constant attention. She fed him, cuddled him, tried to understand and anticipate his needs, and took care of everything, including his peeing and pooping.

We were all at one time precisely in this situation, and someone or other must have cared for us in this same comprehensive way. Without one hundred percent total care from someone else, or maybe several others, we would not be here. This is certainly grounds for gratitude to others.

There could not be what we call a person without other people.

But our dependence on others did not end there. We didn't grow up and become independent. Now we can hold up our heads, fix our dinner, wipe our butts, and we seem not to need our mother or father to take care of us—we think we are autonomous.

But consider this for a moment. Did you grow the food that sustains you every day? Did you make the car or train that takes you to work? Sew your clothing? Build your own house with lumber you milled?

You need others every single day, every single moment of your life. It's thanks to others and their presence and effort that you have the things you need to continue, and that you have friendship and love and meaning in your life. Without others, you have nothing.

Our dependence on others runs even deeper than this. Where does the person we take ourselves to be come from in the first place? Apart from our parents' genes and their support and care, and society and all it produces for us, there's the whole network of conditions and circumstances that intimately makes us what we are. How about our thoughts and feelings? Where do they come from? Without words to think in, we don't think, we don't have anything like a sense of self as we understand it, and we don't have the emotions and feelings that are shaped and defined by our words. Without the myriad circumstances that provided us the opportunities for education, for speech, for knowledge, for work, we wouldn't be here as we are.

So it is literally the case that there could not be what we call a person without other people. We can say "person" as if there could be such an autonomous thing, but in fact there is no such thing. There is no such thing as a person—there are only persons who have co-created one another over the long history of our species. The idea of an independent, isolated, atomized person is impossible. And here we are not only speaking of our needing others practically. We are talking about our inmost sense of identity. Our consciousness of ourselves is never independent of others.

This is what nonself or emptiness means in Buddhist teaching: that there is no such thing as an isolated individual. Though we can say there is, and though we might think there is, and though many of our thoughts and motivations seem to be based on this idea, in fact it is an erroneous idea. Literally every thought in our minds, every emotion that we feel, every word that comes out of our mouth, every material sustenance that we need to get through the day, comes through the kindness of and the interaction with others. And not only other people but nonhumans too, literally the whole of the earth, the soil, the sky, the trees, the air we breathe, the water we drink. We don't just depend on all of this; we are all of it and it is us. This is no theory, no poetic religious teaching. It is simply the bald fact of the matter.

So to practice *Be grateful to everyone* is to train in this profound understanding. It is to cultivate every day this sense of gratitude, the happiest of all attitudes. Unhappiness and gratitude simply cannot exist in the same moment. If you feel grateful, you are a happy person. If you feel grateful for what is possible for you in this moment, no matter what your challenges are, if you feel grateful that you are alive at all, that you can think, that you can feel, that you can stand, sit, walk, talk—if you feel grateful, you are happy and you maximize your chances for well-being and for sharing happiness with others.

4. See Confusion as Buddha and Practice Emptiness

The fourth slogan, *See confusion as buddha and practice emptiness*, requires a bit of explanation. This goes beyond our conventional or relative understanding to a deeper sense of what we are. Though conventionally I am me and you are you, from an absolute perspective, a God's-eye view, if you will, there is no self and other. There's only being, and there's only love, which is being sharing itself with itself without impediment and with warmth.

It just happens to look like you and me to us, because this is how our minds and sensory apparatus works. This love without boundary is emptiness practice.

See confusion as buddha and practice emptiness means that we situate ourselves differently with respect to our ordinary human confusion, our resistance, our pain, our fear, our grief, and so on. Rather than hoping these emotions and reactions will eventually go away and we will be free of them, we take them to a deeper level. We look at their underlying reality.

What is actually going on when we are upset or angry? If we could unhook ourselves for a moment from the blaming and the wishing and the self-pitying and look instead at the actual basis of what is in fact going on, what would we see? We would see time passing. We would see things changing. We would see life arising and passing away, coming from nowhere and going nowhere. Moment by moment, time slips away and things transform. The present becomes the past—or does it become the future? And yet right now there is no past or future. As soon as we examine “now,” it is gone. And we cannot know how or where it goes.

This may sound like philosophy, but it doesn't feel like philosophy when you or someone close to you is giving birth. If at that moment you are standing in the delivery room or are yourself, in pain and joy, giving birth—in that first bursting-forth moment, you are amazed. This small life you think you have been living, with its various issues and problems, completely disappears in the face of the miracle of visceral life springing forth in front of your eyes. Or if you are present when someone leaves this world and enters death (if there is such a place to enter), you know then that this emptiness is not just philosophy. You may not know what it is, but you will know that it is real. You know that this reality is powerful and makes you see your life, and the whole of life, quite differently. A new context emerges that is more than thought, more than concept. When you view your daily human problems in the light of actual birth and actual death, you are practicing with this slogan. Every moment of your life, even (and maybe especially) your moments of pain or despair or confusion, is a moment of buddha.

So do attend births and deaths whenever you can and accept these moments as gifts, as opportunities for deep spiritual practice. But even when you aren't participating in these peak moments, you can repeat and review this slogan, and you can meditate on it. And when your mind is confused and entangled, you can take a breath and try to slip below the level of your desire and confusion. You can notice that in this very moment time is passing, things are transforming, and this impossible fact is profound, beautiful, and joyful, even as you continue with your misery.

5. Do Good, Avoid Evil, Appreciate Your Lunacy, Pray for Help

Now the slogans bring us back down to earth. If spiritual teachings are to really transform our lives, they need to oscillate (as the slogans do) between two levels, the profound and the mundane. If practice is too profound, it's no good. We are full of wonderful, lofty insights, but lack the ability to get through the day with any gracefulness or to relate to the issues and people in ordinary life. We may be soaringly metaphysical, movingly compassionate, and yet unable to relate to a normal human or a worldly problem. This is the moment when the Zen master whacks us with her stick and says, “Wash your bowls! Kill the Buddha!”

On the other hand, if practice is too mundane, if we become too interested in the details of how we and others feel and what we or they need or want, then the natural loftiness of our hearts will not be accessible to us, and we will sink under the weight of obligations, details, and daily-life concerns. This is when the master says, “If you have a staff, I will give you a staff; if you need a staff, I will take it away.” We need both profound religious philosophy and practical tools for daily living. This double need, according to circumstances, seems to go with the territory of being human. We have just been contemplating reality as buddha and practicing emptiness. That was important. Now it's time to get back down to earth.

First, *do good*. Do positive things. Say hello to people, smile at them, tell them happy birthday, I am sorry for your loss, is there something I can do to help? These things are normal social graces, and people say them all the time. But to practice them intentionally is to work a bit harder at actually meaning them. We genuinely try to be helpful and kind and thoughtful in as many small and large ways as we can every day.

Second, *avoid evil*. This means to pay close attention to our actions of body, speech, and mind, noticing when we do, say, or think things that are harmful or unkind. Having come this far with our mind training, we can't help but notice our shoddy or mean-spirited moments. And when we notice them, we feel bad. In the past we might have said to ourselves, “I only said that because she really needs straightening out. If she hadn't done that to me, I wouldn't have said that to her. It really was her fault.” Now we see that this was a way of protecting ourselves (after all, we have just been practicing *Drive all blames into one*) and are willing to accept responsibility for what we have done. So we pay attention to what we say, think, and do—not obsessively, not with a perfectionist flair, but just as a matter of course and with generosity and understanding—and finally we purify ourselves of most of our ungenerous thoughts and words.

The last two practices in this slogan, which I have interpreted as *Appreciate your lunacy* and *Pray for help*, traditionally have to do with making offerings to two kinds of creatures: demons (beings who are preventing you from keeping determined with your practice) and dharma protectors (beings who are helping you to remain true to your practice). But for our purposes now it is better to see these practices more broadly.

We can understand making offerings to demons as “appreciate your lunacy.” Bow to your own weakness, your own craziness, your own resistance. Congratulate yourself for them, appreciate them. Truly it is a marvel, the extent to which we are selfish, confused, lazy, resentful, and so on. We come by these things honestly. We have been well trained to manifest them at every turn. This is the prodigy of human life bursting forth at its seams, it is the effect of our upbringing, our society, which we appreciate even as we are trying to tame it and bring it gently round to the good. So we make offerings to the demons inside us and we develop a sense of humorous appreciation for our own stupidity. We are in good company! We can laugh at ourselves and everyone else.

In making offerings to dharma protectors, we pray to whatever forces we believe or don't believe in for help. Whether we imagine a deity or a God or not, we can reach out beyond ourselves and beyond anything we can objectively depict and ask for assistance and strength for our spiritual work. We can do this in meditation, with silent words, or out loud, vocalizing our hopes and wishes.

Prayer is a powerful practice. It is not a matter of abrogating our own responsibility. We are not asking to be absolved of the need to act. We are asking for help and for strength to do what we know we must do, with the understanding that though we must do our best, whatever goodness comes our way is not our accomplishment, our personal production. It comes from a wider sphere than we can control. In fact, it is counter-productive to conceive of spiritual practice as a task that we are going to accomplish on our own. After all, haven't we already practiced Be grateful to everyone? Haven't we learned that there is no way to do anything alone? We are training, after all, in spiritual practice, not personal self-help (though we hope it helps us, and probably it does). So not only does it make sense to pray for help, not only does it feel powerfully right and good to do so, it is also important to do this so that we remember we are not alone and we can't do it by ourselves.

It would be natural for us to forget this point, to fall into our habit of imagining an illusory self-reliance. People often say that Buddhists don't pray because Buddhism is an atheistic or nontheistic tradition that doesn't recognize God or a Supreme Being. This may be technically so, but the truth is that Buddhists pray and have always prayed. They pray to a whole panoply of buddhas and bodhisattvas. Even Zen Buddhists pray. Praying does not require a belief in God or gods.

6. Whatever You Meet is the Path

This slogan sums up the other five: whatever happens, good or bad, make it part of your spiritual practice.

In spiritual practice, which is our life, there are no breaks and no mistakes. We human beings are always doing spiritual practice, whether we know it or not. You may think that you have lost the thread of your practice, that you were going along quite well and then life got busy and complicated and you lost track of what you were doing. You may feel bad about this, and that feeling feeds on itself, and it becomes harder and harder to get back on track.

But this is just what you think; it's not what's going on. Once you begin practice, you always keep going, because everything is practice, even the days or the weeks or entire lifetimes when you forgot to meditate. Even then you're still practicing, because it's impossible to be lost. You are constantly being found, whether you know it or not. To practice this slogan is to know that no matter what is going on—no matter how distracted you think you are, no matter how much you feel like a terribly lazy individual who has completely lost track of her good intentions and is now hopelessly astray—even then you have the responsibility and the ability to take all negativity, bad circumstance, and difficulty and turn it into the path.

© 2013, by Norman Fischer. Excerpted from “Training in Compassion: Zen Teachings on the Practice of Lojong.”

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source: <https://www.lionsroar.com/life-is-tough-six-ways-to-deal-with-it-march-2013/>