“I have no doubt that those who [put these teachings into practice] will... notice a change in their mental attitudes and responses to people and events. Their minds will become more disciplined and positive. And I am sure they will find their own sense of happiness grow as they contribute to the greater happiness of others.” —from the Foreword by His Holiness the Dalai Lama

“Anyone who needs to cope with life's problems should read this inspiring book. Transforming Problems into Happiness has benefited me immensely. I recommend it very highly indeed.” —Lillian Too, author of The Complete Illustrated Guide to Feng Shui

“A useful companion.” —Tricycle

“This book should be read as the words of a wise, loving parent whose sternness underlines the importance of what is being taught. A masterfully brief statement...on the nature of humanity and human suffering.”
—Utne Reader

“This small volume contains a wealth of wisdom.” —The Beacon

This new edition includes Dodrupchen Rinpoche's Instructions on Turning Happiness and Suffering into the Path of Enlightenment, translated by Tulku Thundop.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche is the Spiritual Director of the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT), a worldwide network of Buddhist centers, monasteries, and affiliated projects. His books include The Door to Satisfaction and Wisdom Energy.
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TRANSFORMING PROBLEMS INTO HAPPINESS
TRANSFORMING PROBLEMS into HAPPINESS

Lama Zopa Rinpoche

Foreword by His Holiness the Dalai Lama

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Contents

Foreword by His Holiness the Dalai Lama vii

1 The Purpose of Life 1

2 Developing a Different Attitude to Problems 5

3 Happiness and Suffering Are Created by Your Mind 15

4 The Shortcomings of Anger and Desire 21

5 Transforming Your Problems into the Path 31

6 Experiencing Your Problems for Others 49

7 The Heart Advice 59

Afterword 67

Appendix: Root Text 69

Glossary 83

Suggested Further Reading 89
Publisher’s Acknowledgment

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I BELIEVE THAT THE PURPOSE of our lives is to achieve happiness. But happiness is of two kinds: one that derives from physical comfort and the other which essentially flows from our minds and our thoughts. Of these two, the happiness that derives from the mind is the more important. If our mind is calm and happy, we can put up with physical discomfort, but sensual pleasure alone will never set the mind at ease. When our minds are restless and disturbed, no matter how much luxury or physical comfort we may enjoy, these things alone will not make us happy.

The importance of our mental experience gives rise to the question, “Can we train the mind?” The Buddha explained many methods and paths by which we can purify our minds and achieve the fully awakened state of buddhahood. Among these, there is a special instruction called mind training. This instruction outlines the very heart of the Buddhist practice, cultivation of the awakening mind. These simple but far-reaching techniques for training the mind, particularly those that deal with concern for others and turning adversity to advantage, have virtually become part of the Tibetan character. It is this latter technique that Zopa Rinpoche particularly deals with in this book. And it is this pattern of thought, transforming problems into happiness, that has enabled the Tibetan people to maintain their dignity and spirit in the face of great
difficulties. Indeed I have found this advice of great practical benefit in my own life.

Zopa Rinpoche has immersed himself in both the study and practice of the mind-training tradition, and in his travels around the world he is constantly meeting people who wish for happiness, but instead are beset by problems. He draws on a wealth of experience. Here he has taken as the primary focus of his advice a short text by the great scholar and remarkable yogi, Dodrupchen Jigme Tenpe Nyima. So, the source of the teaching is impeccable; what remains is for readers to put what they read into practice. I have no doubt that those who do will, over a period of time, notice a change in their mental attitudes and responses to people and events. Their minds will become more disciplined and positive. And I am sure they will find their own sense of happiness grow as they contribute to the greater happiness of others. I offer my prayers that readers of this new edition who make this their goal will be blessed with success.

The Dalai Lama
February 14, 2001
The Purpose of Life

You have this precious human body in order to serve other living beings.
This precious human body

The purpose of having this precious human body is not simply to achieve happiness for oneself, but to eliminate the suffering of all other beings and to bring them happiness as well. This is the purpose of each of our lives. This human body is precious because with it you have the capacity and opportunity to pursue spiritual development in order to serve other living beings.

Everyone wants happiness; no one wants suffering. The happiness we need is not just ordinary, fleeting happiness; what we really need is ultimate happiness, the unsurpassed, unshakable happiness of enlightenment. When people go shopping, for example, they want the things that are the best, that will last the longest; in the same way, everyone wants the longest-lasting, highest happiness. According to their understanding of what level of happiness is achievable, everyone attempts to obtain whatever is, in their view, the highest happiness.

The Buddha’s teachings, called the Dharma, tell us the highest happiness achievable is enlightenment. The only reason anyone would not want to achieve enlightenment is that they lack Dharma wisdom. Lacking Dharma wisdom means simply being unaware that there exists a happiness higher than ordinary happiness. Anyone who has encountered the Dharma and studied it sincerely knows that one can be liberated from the bondage of suffering and can experience peerless happiness, that one can put an end to all obscurations, and that one can attain all the realizations of a buddha. Of course a person who knows these things can be achieved wants to achieve them.
With such an understanding, it becomes clear that the greatest benefit anyone can offer living beings is to lead them to the enlightened state. In order to reach this, you have to follow a path that actually leads to enlightenment. Therefore, you have to know all the various methods, without the slightest mistake. In order to do this, you must first achieve enlightenment yourself. By achieving enlightenment, you achieve the state of omniscient mind of a buddha. To be most effective in revealing the path to others, you need to be able to see fully and exactly every single characteristic of their minds. For, as living beings have various characteristics and levels of intelligence, a variety of methods are needed to guide them. Only the omniscient mind of a buddha knows every single characteristic and level of intelligence of living beings and all the methods needed to liberate them.

*Mahayana thought transformation*

In order to achieve omniscient mind, you need to follow the path to omniscient mind. You need to practice the entire graduated path to enlightenment, what is called in Tibetan the *lamrim*. This graduated path contains the essence of the entire Dharma, of all the Buddha’s teachings. It is said that we are in “the quarreling age,” an extremely difficult time on this earth when violence and greed are everywhere, and there are many obstacles to practicing Dharma. Even having encountered the Dharma, you will still find it extremely difficult to continue and succeed in your practice—inner and outer obstacles will pour down like rain.

In order to succeed in listening to, reflecting on, and meditating on the graduated path to enlightenment for the benefit and happiness of all sentient beings, you must learn to practice Mahayana thought transformation—and this is what this book will teach you. In Mahayana thought transformation, also called “mind training,” you use whatever problems you experience to generate the realizations along the path to enlighten-
ment within your mind. Instead of disturbing you, problems can actually help you develop your mind and even further your progress on the path to enlightenment. Without practicing thought transformation, you will be unable to complete your Dharma practice, your inner mental development. This is why I thought to explain to you a short text by Dodrupchen Rinpoche, *Instructions on Turning Happiness and Suffering into the Path of Enlightenment*.

There are various lamrim meditations that can be applied when you have problems. Dodrupchen Rinpoche’s text is based on two famous texts by early Indian masters: *The Precious Garland* by Nagarjuna and *Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life* by Shantideva. Dodrupchen Rinpoche, Jigme Tenpe Nyima, a highly attained lama of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism, whose holy mind had reached very high realizations of tantra, was also learned in the teachings of the great Gelug-school founder, Lama Tsongkhapa. Jigme Tenpe Nyima’s teaching does not contain anything that is not also contained in such well-known texts as *The Seven-Point Mind Training* by Geshe Chekawa and *The Eight Verses* by Langri Tangpa, or in the various other teachings on thought transformation, but the way he relates the practice of lamrim to the experience of problems and obstacles is different.

With regard to this particular practice of thought transformation, there are two aspects: using suffering in the path to enlightenment and using happiness in the path to enlightenment. Here, I will be talking about how to use suffering, or problems, in the path to enlightenment and unsurpassed happiness.
Developing a Different Attitude to Problems

The thought of liking problems should arise naturally, like the thought of liking ice cream or the thought of liking music.
IN THIS CHALLENGING MODERN TIME with many problems and much unhappiness, human beings are especially overwhelmed by suffering, and their minds are not resilient. This is because they are unable to recognize as beneficial the problems and harm they experience and to see these problems as causes of happiness. Human beings who have not encountered the Dharma are unable to recognize this and unable to train their minds in this recognition.

Instead of seeing all the problems you experience—whether caused by living beings or by situations and circumstances—as problems, you need to develop the habit of recognizing them all as beneficial conditions supporting happiness, and in fact being causes for happiness. But you can’t change your perception all at once. You must begin by trying to recognize small problems as beneficial, then gradually, as you become more accustomed to this, you can start to recognize larger, more serious problems as good, even pleasurable, and ultimately necessary for your happiness. You will see everything that disturbs you as essential for achieving happiness.

But make no mistake: The practice of thought transformation is not intended to eliminate problems but rather to enable you to use the problems you experience to train your mind to move step by step along the path to enlightenment and ultimate happiness. It is not that you will no longer receive harm from other people, or from circumstances, or from disease and old age; you will simply not be disturbed by anything that happens. The events that the untrained mind perceives as problems cannot in and of themselves disturb your practice of Dharma; they cannot
prevent your attainment of the realizations of the path to enlightenment. In fact, when you practice thought transformation, not only do problems not disturb you, they actually help you to develop your mind and continue your Dharma practice.

How do you use problems in support of your Dharma practice, and your attainment of happiness? You have to train your mind in two ways. First, you stop the thought of complete aversion to suffering, and second, you generate the thought of welcoming problems. When you have accomplished this and actually feel happy rather than unhappy to have problems, problems no longer become obstacles to generating the path to enlightenment within your mind.

_The fault of seeing only problems_

We all come to harm from other beings, from illness, and from other events and circumstances. As long as our mind is conditioned to identify such experiences as problems, we will only find more and more people and conditions disturbing. The smallest, most insignificant matter will cause great pain in our mind, and we will become upset very quickly. The root of the problem, the true cause of our suffering, is not the external being or event that brings us harm, but rather it is our strongly selfish mind.

When we habitually identify everything as a problem, even something so small as being given food that is a little cold causes great discomfort in our mind. Something a little off with the way someone dresses or looks, something not quite in line with our own idea of how it should be, becomes the cause of great suffering. If we hear a noise during the night that wakes us up, we become incredibly angry. The whole of the next day we complain about it: “Oh, I didn’t get any sleep last night!” Not getting enough sleep becomes an unbelievable problem, an unbelievable suffering.

If a tiny, insignificant being, such as a flea, runs over our leg and bites us while we are sleeping or meditating, it becomes an unbelievably huge
problem. Some Westerners spend thousands of dollars to go to Kathmandu, but after spending just one night there, they decide they cannot stand the uncomfortable conditions and fly back home the next day.

It is the nature of the mind to become addicted to certain ways of seeing things. By habitually seeing as a problem every tiny thing that does not accord exactly with our self-cherishing wishes, we exaggerate small things into huge problems. If we see even small sufferings as big problems and get irritated by them, we become unceasingly overwhelmed by a heavy, unhappy mind. It then becomes extremely difficult for us to bear any problem whatsoever. Everything appears threatening. Everything appears unsatisfying. Everything we hear, see, taste, smell, or touch makes us unhappy. Our mind exaggerates problems, and we find that our life is filled with irritation, depression, paranoia, and perhaps even nervous breakdowns. We are constantly overwhelmed by our completely unhappy mind, and it is very hard for us to be happy for one day, for even one hour.

We have no opportunity to experience happiness if there is nothing that we like, nothing that is satisfactory. Whatever we try, wherever we go, everything makes us unhappy.

Not realizing that this is our own doing, that we have trained our mind to this negative way of thinking, we point to external things—other beings or circumstances—as the source of our problems. The more we think that our problems come from outside, the more our anger arises. Like a fire blazing as we pour more and more oil on it, our anger blazes higher and higher, bringing greater negative karma; then unbearably great anger arises, bringing even heavier negative karma. We become angry at everything that appears to our senses, everyone and everything we see. This state is known in the Buddhist teachings as “all appearances arising as the enemy.”

What is the alternative to this state? The great eleventh-century meditator Milarepa is normally pictured keeping his right hand at his ear in a gesture of listening. This is because everything appeared to Milarepa in the form of advice; everything appeared as a teaching. For skillful meditators with well-trained minds, instead of all appearances arising as the enemy,
they actually appear as the opposite: as a friend and a teacher. Instead of disturbing us, everything appears as beneficial and supportive. To skillful meditators, everything appears as bliss, everything appears as a manifestation of emptiness—the ultimate nature of all things—and so, skillful meditators are unhindered by problems.

Seeing the benefits of problems

When you perceive a problem, if you remember the benefits of having problems and approach it with the practice of Mahayana thought transformation, your problem becomes desirable. Instead of hindering you, your problems become good and useful.

No matter how many problems you have, there is no point at all in being disturbed or irritated by them. When you meet miserable, undesirable conditions, it is extremely important to think over and over again of the great shortcomings of perceiving them as problems and of being irritated by them. There is no benefit perceiving circumstances in this way. It is simply unnecessary to see them as problems.

You may have a measure of control over certain situations, but there are others you just have to endure. For example, no matter how upset you are that your house is not made of gold, you have no power to turn the bricks into gold. And no matter how upset you are that the sky is not the earth, you cannot turn the sky into the earth. There is no point in expending even a moment’s concern about such things. No matter how much you worry about any external problem and no matter how irritated you become, your irritation cannot make the problem go away.

As the Indian master Shantideva explains in his Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life, if a problem can be solved, there is no point in being upset about it; there is no reason to be angry, and no reason to be depressed. And if the problem is something that cannot be changed, there is also no point in being unhappy, in disliking it, or in becoming angry. Therefore, no matter what happens, there is no point in being angry or depressed.
No matter what happens, there is always a reason to think: “This is a favorable, beneficial condition.” For example, when someone is bitten by a poisonous snake, cutting away the flesh around the bite is regarded as beneficial, although it is painful. It is not considered harmful, because it protects one’s life. According to the Tibetan system of medicine, when a disease contaminating the inside of your body shows some sign of coming out, it generally means that you are getting better. Its coming out of the body—instead of staying inside, getting larger and larger, and lasting a long time—is regarded as a good thing. It is still a sickness, but it is nonetheless regarded as good.

Identifying the harms you receive as problems has great shortcomings. Think of all the problems you have experienced in your life. Then contemplate over and over again the result of seeing them as problems. Has it benefited you or not? Try to see as clearly as possible the shortcomings of this attitude. Then generate a very strong positive motivation, determining that, “From now on, no matter what problems I have to face, I won’t become irritated by them. I won’t identify any circumstances or obstacles I experience as problems. I’ll regard them as positive.” Generating this brave, determined attitude is extremely important for your thought-transformation practice to succeed.

With this strong motivation as a foundation, proceed to train your mind until you become like an experienced horseman—even though his mind may be distracted, he is able to manage the horse effortlessly, no matter what it does, without falling off or endangering his life. He is able to cope because his body responds naturally to the way the horse runs. Similarly, when meeting miserable conditions or obstacles, an experienced thought-transformation practitioner immediately and effortlessly recognizes them as good. The thought of liking the problem arises naturally, like the thought of liking ice cream or the thought of liking music. When a person who enjoys music hears music, the thought of liking it arises naturally, without any need to consider the reasons.

When you meet undesirable conditions, if you spontaneously recognize them as good, you will be happy. During times of criticism, poverty,
difficulties, failure, sickness, or even imminent death, nothing will disturb your mind. You will be consistently happy. Effortlessly, naturally, you will recognize the benefits of problems. And the more you see the benefits, the happier you will be to experience difficulties in your life.

By training your mind and becoming accustomed to not seeing problems as problems, even great problems of the mind and body become so easy to bear that you experience no difficulty when you encounter them. Problems become enjoyable, as light and soft as cotton.

Seeing problems as joyful

It is essential to be well prepared before actually meeting miserable conditions, since being able to use them as a basis for virtue and happiness is extremely difficult. With prior training, however, you can more easily apply the thought-transformation practice you have been practicing.

To transform problems into happiness, it is not sufficient simply to see that problems help your practice of virtue. This alone is not enough. You must clearly recognize that your problems are actually necessary conditions for your practice of virtue, and you can derive continual, stable happiness from this.

During difficult times, remember that your problems are benefiting you immensely by allowing you to achieve not only temporal happiness but also happiness in future lives, as well as liberation, and the ultimate happiness of enlightenment. Even though your problems may be very heavy and difficult to bear, remember that they are the most joyful things to have because they benefit you continuously.

As long as you see something as a problem and allow it to irritate you, you cause that problem to disturb your mind. While this is happening, there is no way to transform that suffering into Dharma practice. But when you are able to stop seeing problems as problems, you are able to use suffering in your Dharma practice. Problems actually enable you to increase your good karma. They become the cause of happiness.
It is not enough to hear me say these things; this has to come from your own experience. Of course, you cannot suddenly face big problems and transform them into the Buddhist path. As much as you are able, train your mind to transform small sufferings; then, when you experience big problems or great disasters—even death, the most fearful thing of all—you will be able to infuse them with virtue and use them in your Dharma practice to move further along the path to ultimate happiness.

Stopping the thought of disliking problems and generating the thought of liking them makes the mind happy. With this attitude, you can always maintain your practice without depression or discouragement. Because you have cultivated a strong belief that experiencing problems is desirable and joyful, even though you may have a problem, it will not disturb your mind and you will easily be able to bear it.

This is how you can utilize disease and other problems in your life, such as adversaries you believe are disturbing your happiness or your Dharma practice. Even if they persist in what they are doing, they will be utterly unable to interfere with your happiness and so cannot disturb your mind.

In short, train your mind to see the beauty in all problems. In order for problems to appear desirable to you, you have to stop looking at the shortcomings of situations. Put all your effort into looking at the benefits of problems. Whether a life situation is wonderful or not depends on the way your mind perceives and interprets it. You can choose to label an experience “wonderful” or “problematic.” It depends completely upon your mind, upon your interpretation. Your experiences will definitely change as you change the way you think.

When I was in Lawudo Cave many years ago, I found a text called *Opening the Door of Dharma: The Initial Stage of Training the Mind in the Graduated Path to Enlightenment*. This was the only general text I found there, among the many other handwritten manuscripts of initiations and deity practices. I must have read a lot in that text about the shortcomings of grasping onto worldly things, such as material goods or fame. After that, when the local people brought me offerings—for example, a plate
filled with corn and rice with some money on top, which according to their custom is called a mandala—I was very fearful because I realized the dangers of those offerings; I was afraid of receiving a reputation and becoming famous. There was much fear in my heart because I saw the pitfalls so clearly. So you see, at that time I was trying to practice Dharma. Now, however, I have sunk completely into the quagmire of worldly concern!