

CHAPTER SIX

acceptance: the method of effortlessness



EACH OF US has a strong desire to live a life free from all unwanted conditions: illness, misfortune, old age, and death. A few weeks ago someone asked me to talk about old age. I could see from the expression on his face that he was experiencing fear regarding the problem of so-called old age. As long as we are living in this human form it is impossible to have a life that is completely free from the conditions that we don't want: old age, illness, and other kinds of problems. Sometimes we are so extremely fearful that we have what I call a phobia. Phobia is a psychological term that means we fear or dread something in an obsessive, even irrational, way.

This primal desire for perfect conditions is a complex mixture of our instinctual impulse for physical comfort and our unconscious drive to be free from anything that even remotely reminds us of our fragility and mortality. As a result each of us constantly fantasizes about having an utterly perfect existence. We want to be in a paradise, in a heaven free from every circumstance we don't want to face. In all of human history, no one has actualized that kind of a life. Still we maintain and feed this childish fantasy that if we fight hard enough against reality, then sooner or later we will achieve this idealized life,

free from all unwanted conditions and situations. Some of us work very hard fighting against reality.

One time I was invited to a party. There were a few people drinking champagne and soaking in a hot tub and, while they were in these very nice circumstances, they were complaining about their lives. They were complaining at that same exact moment they were drinking champagne and soaking in a hot tub and right after they had finished eating a very nice dinner. You see that this is contradictory. In some sense this is a little out of balance. These people had everything. They were having a fantastic time in terms of enjoying worldly pleasures and at the same time they were creating an imaginary experience of suffering and conflict. What they were complaining about doesn't really exist. If you looked for a reason to suffer, you could not find it anywhere in the proximity of their current situation.

In the same way, when we think that we have conflicts and hindrances, most of the time we can never actually find out where these conflicts and hindrances are. That's because they are only found lingering in our consciousness. Our consciousness is like a factory where we create all kinds of imaginary problems. It is a big factory.

Many people are rightly afraid of pollution. They are afraid of things like air pollution from automobiles, factories, oil refineries, and so forth. But unawakened consciousness is, I think, much more polluting than any of these. It might be useful to visualize that there is a factory in our consciousness constantly producing the pollution of imaginary problems, imaginary conflicts. It is the full time job of this egoic mind. No wonder most people are suffering.

People always suffer either consciously or unconsciously

because they mistakenly believe that if they fight against reality then they will be able to achieve their fantasies. They will be able to achieve this childish fantasy that they can have a life free from all unwanted conditions such as old age, car accidents, not having enough money, being sick, having aches, and so forth. Maybe when we look back forty or fifty years from now, if we live long enough, the problems that we are struggling with today will be just a memory. Hopefully we will be quite awake at that time and we will say to each other, "I was so immature then. I really didn't have to take everything so seriously because everything is already emptiness." One day we will be able to say that.

In Buddhism it is often said that there are external and internal hindrances, in other words, external obstacles and internal obstacles. The external obstacles are the more physical obstacles that we all face—things like earthquakes, being tired, a toothache, a flat tire, or anything that gets in the way of what we want. Nobody is born under such auspicious or lucky stars that they don't have to face external obstacles. We are constantly facing external obstacles each and every day. The moment we wake up, our nose is clogged. That is an external obstacle. The toilet doesn't flush correctly. That is an external obstacle too. Our fingernail is too long and our nail clipper is missing. That is an external obstacle. These are small obstacles.

However, every now and then we can have a major life crisis, like discovering that we are terminally ill or that we don't have enough money to buy food. That happens too. That is happening here to some extent, but it is not as widespread as in parts of the world where, day after day, people don't have any food. Either there is none or they can't afford to buy it. People can't feed their children. They don't know

if there will be anything at all to eat tonight. They have to go out on the street and beg. That's their only hope of getting something to eat. At least most of us know that we are going to eat tonight. External obstacles can be challenging especially when there is a life crisis like the death of a loved one. Also, we could become ill, unable to meet our physical needs. It is very difficult to be in that position when you don't have a sense of spiritual realization, when you are not somebody like Milarepa or Machik Labdron or even one of my teachers, Lama Tsur Lo.

Lama Tsur Lo suffered from a spinal deformity. He was completely bent over at the waist and could not stand up straight. He always used a walking stick. He couldn't walk without it. His physical appearance was the exact opposite of the Greek god of beauty, Adonis. The extent of his wealth added up to zero. But Lama Tsur Lo was truly content and very, very happy. He had great spiritual realization but he was very humble and wanted people to think of him as very ordinary, not as a special or holy person. When you have true realization, like the great masters, you can transcend everything. You can transcend illness. You can transcend every problem that you can imagine and even those that you cannot imagine. There's not one single crisis or life condition that you cannot transcend when you are completely liberated, transformed, awakened inside through the power of cultivating spiritual discipline. For ordinary people who don't have that internal liberation, the external obstacles can be very challenging, so challenging that sometimes it can actually push them away from the path to liberation.

There is a tendency in many of us to think that spiritual practice is going to fix all of our problems. We carry these unexamined, infantile hopes and fantasies. This has to do

with the fact that our relationship with spirituality is often dominated by unconscious forces. It is not the squeaky clean business we hoped it to be. It is a tricky, painful, exhilarating, and ecstatic voyage. What could be more complex than that?

As long as we are building defense mechanisms, transformation will be exiled to the realm of improbability. And these defense mechanisms, wearing a spiritual mask now, comprise layers of denial, each one more subtle than the other. It is like finding a new cradle where we can be infantile again and have no responsibility for ourselves. Mommy and Daddy are projected onto an omnipotent god or guru who will take care of us eternally. There is nothing more gratifying than having no responsibilities. Conversion experiences are so sumptuous and juicy and vacation is so desirable. But this cradle is not well made. Sooner or later we will encounter its limitations.

When we become involved in a spiritual path, we see that it isn't going to fix all of our problems. As time goes by we begin to see that life's problems are not getting easier. There is no magic wand, so it is very common to lose that initial love that we had with our spiritual practice. Spirituality is not about fixing all of our problems and the earlier we find out about this, the less disappointment we are going to face. We have to let go of all of these fantasies. The earlier we let go of them the better it is. If we hang on to them, we often run into disappointment and that can sometimes create a huge obstacle to inner awakening. It can completely draw us away from the path. So we have to remember this and maintain the perspective that our spiritual path is not really a remedy or antidote that is going to fix all of our problems. It is not going to remove all of our unwanted conditions. We are not going to be loved by everybody because we are on a spiritual path.

The world is still going to relate to us in the same way it used to. Nobody says, “Oh, now you are on the path. Now I am going to be much kinder to you. I’m going to send flowers. I’m going to create rainbows everywhere you go. I’m going to pave a nice royal road wherever you walk.” On the contrary, sometimes it seems that the world becomes even more challenging when we are on the path because the spiritual path wakes us up. It requires losing all of our investment in illusion. Growth can be painful.

There is a saying, “Be careful what you wish for.” We have to be careful what we wish for because sometimes if we pray for liberation, especially if we pray for liberation right now, then the world can be very wrathful and very challenging. When the world presents difficulties and obstacles to us it means that now, fortunately, we have the opportunity to pass through all of our reactions, all of our habits, all of our thought patterns, all of our karmic behaviors. We can rise above all of these illusory conditions and maintain the mind of the Buddha, blissful awareness.

Therefore, if we are determined to discover awakening at any cost, then we must also expect and be prepared for the fact that we may run into challenges and difficulties. These challenges are not always external obstacles; they are internal obstacles too. They include experiences of doubt, anger, irrational emotion, depression, and so forth. Even Buddha encountered a great challenge before his awakening. He had a vision that he was being attacked, ambushed by the forces of Mara, just before his total enlightenment. It was the defining moment where he had to choose between triumph and utter defeat.

So now the question is, How are we supposed to deal with outer conditions, the external aspects of everyday life? The

answer is acceptance. We have to learn how to accept what is. This is the number one goal. Learning how to accept what is is the number one goal for spiritual seekers. Sometimes we do accept what is. As the great Tibetan saint Patrul Rinpoche said, “When your belly is full and the sun is shining upon you, you act like a holy person. But when negativities befall you, then you act very ordinary.” This means that it is easy to accept the circumstances of our life when everything is going well. But as soon as our expectations are disappointed, in the blink of an eye we lose all of our saintly composure. When things are going in the opposite direction, it is very hard to accept what is. The spiritual precept, the discipline that we have to try to maintain in our heart in all situations, is learning how to stay open in each moment. When we are not ready to accept, we are completely under the jurisdiction of ego and we don’t accept anything. We don’t even like the fact that we are on this planet. But there is nothing that we can do.

Ego is the problem. Sometimes ego is very spoiled, like a child who is constantly throwing tantrums. Sometimes ego doesn’t accept where we are. Sometimes ego doesn’t accept who we are. Sometimes ego doesn’t accept the way things are without any real complaint. So what do we do? There is nothing that we can do. Sometimes ego doesn’t accept the fact that the sky is blue but there is nothing that we can do. You see. Sometimes ego doesn’t accept that we are living on a planet that is permeated with natural disasters, earthquakes, floods, and other catastrophes. All we can do is accept that and learn how to surrender to the flow of all events.

When we accept the way things are we are able to love everything and everybody. When we are not able to accept even one thing in this world right now, then how could we ever develop boundless love? Lack of acceptance is conflict.

Conflict is pain. It is psychological pain. It is a spiritual illness. As long as our hearts are tormented by that pain, we do not have the strength to give our heart to anything and because of that it is impossible to bring about inner awakening. Enlightenment, you see, is just another name for boundless love.

It is almost impossible to practice loving-kindness towards all living beings without addressing, in a meaningful way, the innumerable problems arising in our own lives. It is a contradiction, you see. It does not work. If our heart is tormented because we are not able to accept things the way they are, then it is impossible to open our heart. It is impossible to let go of all of our defenses and embrace others. Therefore we have to constantly practice and deepen our awareness. We have to remind ourselves to accept things as they are. This is pretty much what the teachings called Mind Training are all about. Mind Training in Buddhism is about carrying those perspectives and even reciting slogans, phrases like “I shall accept the way things are.”

There is a wonderful student who writes a reminder to himself every morning when he wakes up. He tells me, “Today my practice is to accept the way things are.” Or, “Today my practice is to love everybody.” Today my aspiration is, “I’m not going to get angry. I’m not going to judge people. I’m going to be thankful for everything.” He comes up with these amazing thoughts every day out of his utter devotion to spiritual practice. In the same way, we should turn our minds to reciting and carrying out those teachings, those enlightened perspectives, and say, “I am going to accept everything.” When we accept everything then there isn’t any problem. All problems dissolve right there.

When we don’t accept even one small thing then a small

problem can become a big problem. Just a tiny problem, when you don't accept it, can completely destroy your entire inner peace. Imagine that we look into the mirror today and suddenly realize, whatever . . . there is something wrong with our clothes. There is something wrong with our hairstyle. We have nice hair but then one hair goes astray. It is going *this* way and we want to keep pushing it, wanting it to go *that* way. If we take that seriously, it can be enough to destroy our whole day. At first it is no problem. Then we think, "I don't like the fact that one hair is going in that direction." Our mind has a tendency to blow everything out of proportion. "I really hate the fact that one hair is going in the wrong direction. I don't like it. I hate it." This dark thought keeps growing and before we know it our entire consciousness is taken over by that dark, poisonous thought. Then we become angry. We start yelling at people and they start yelling back at us. It creates this whole problem out of nothing. This might sound ridiculous, yet this is how most people live in the world. In general, we are dominated by our thoughts. We are not the master in our own house.

When we accept not just the small problems, but also even the big ones, then they become very easy to handle. We become like those great, enlightened masters, who were able to maintain a mind of love and ecstasy even when they were facing death. There are many stories about the enlightened ones who died in great bliss and grace. They did not carry any unfinished issues. For them death is not a termination but a homecoming. Ultimately there is no one to die. But death looks very real when we are still identifying with small self.

As spiritual seekers we don't have to invite challenges but we do have to celebrate challenges when they visit us. I am not saying that we have to go around looking for trouble.

That is not our assignment. But when troubles arise we must know how to surrender to them and accept them. We even have to be jubilant in a crisis and think, “Oh, this is such an extraordinary, golden opportunity to practice how to accept what I don’t like. If I am able to accept this condition at this moment in my life, then I will be able to transcend all of my fear, all of my insecurities. This is a blessing in disguise.” We have to almost prostrate to the challenges when they visit us without invitation. When they are actually knocking at our door, we have to be thankful to them. In that sense, as spiritual seekers, we have to take our whole life as our practice, as our path. Life is our path. From the moment we wake up in the morning until the time we go to sleep at night, our whole life is filled with opportunities for cultivating acceptance, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, awareness, and mindfulness.

We don’t have to be in any special place to practice true spiritual discipline. We don’t have to be in a temple or a place of meditation. Life is filled with many opportunities to learn and grow. A friend of mine died of cancer. He had an expression that he used when he was going through difficulties. He always used to say, “This is AFOG, another f—ing opportunity to grow.” That was his holy incantation, a little unconventional, but it worked for him. I remember him dancing and singing the last few months of his life. He told me that he had no fear. I sat with him while he was dying and he was totally peaceful. Looking at him was like looking at the face of a sleeping child. There was the same innocence and purity.

The internal obstacles, these are the more intimate issues. Imagine those psychological and spiritual issues that keep coming back. These internal issues keep coming back even after we feel we have resolved them. Sometimes we may feel