



Joyful Practice

Joyful Wisdom
- Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche

Within our perceived weaknesses and imperfections lies the key to realizing our true strength. By facing our disturbing emotions and the problems that occur in our lives, we discover an experience of well-being that extends outward as well as inward. Had I not faced the panic and anxiety I felt through most of my youth, I would not be in the position I find myself today. I would never have found the courage or the strength to get on a plane, travel around the world, and sit before an audience of strangers passing on the wisdom I'd learned not only through my own experience, but the experiences of the truly great masters who were my guides and teachers.

We're all buddhas. We just don't recognize it. We are confined in many ways to a limited view of ourselves and the world around us through cultural conditioning, family upbringing, personal experience, and the basic biological predisposition toward making distinctions and measuring present experience and future hopes and fears against a neuronal warehouse of memories.

Once you commit yourself to developing an awareness of your buddhanature, you'll inevitably start to see changes in your day-to-day experience. Things that used to trouble you gradually lose their power to upset you. You'll become intuitively wiser, more relaxed, and more openhearted. You'll begin to recognize obstacles as opportunities for further growth. And as your illusory sense of limitation and vulnerability gradually fades away, you'll discover deep within yourself the true grandeur of who and what you are.

Best of all, as you start to see your own potential, you'll also begin to recognize it in everyone around you. Buddhanature is not a special quality available to a privileged few. The true mark of recognizing your buddhanature is to realize how ordinary it really is—the ability to see that every living creature shares it, though not everyone

recognizes it in him- or herself. So instead of closing your heart to people who yell at you or act in some other harmful way, you find yourself becoming more open. You recognize that they aren't "jerks," but are people who, like you, want to be happy and peaceful. They're only acting like jerks because they haven't recognized their true nature and are overwhelmed by sensations of vulnerability and fear.

Your practice can begin with the simple aspiration to do better, to approach all of your activities with a greater sense of awareness and insight, and to open your heart more deeply toward others. Motivation is the single most important factor in determining whether your experience is conditioned by suffering or by peace. Wisdom and compassion actually develop at the same pace. The more attentive you become, the easier you'll find it to be compassionate. And the more you open your heart to others, the wiser and more attentive you become in all your activities.

At any given moment, you can choose to follow the chain of thoughts, emotions, and sensations that reinforce a perception of yourself as vulnerable and limited—or you can remember that your true nature is pure, unconditioned, and incapable of being harmed. You can remain in the sleep of ignorance or remember that you are and always have been awake. Either way, you're still expressing the unlimited nature of your true being. Ignorance, vulnerability, fear, anger, and desire are expressions of the infinite potential of your buddhanature. There's nothing inherently wrong or right with making such choices. The fruit of Buddhist practice is simply the recognition that these and other mental afflictions are nothing more or less than choices available to us because our real nature is infinite in scope.

We choose ignorance because we can. We choose awareness because we can. Samsara and nirvana are simply different points of view based on the choices we make in how to examine and understand our experience. There's nothing magical about nirvana and nothing bad or wrong

about samsara. If you're determined to think of yourself as limited, fearful, vulnerable, or scarred by past experience, know only that you have chosen to do so. The opportunity to experience yourself differently is always available.

In essence, the Buddhist path offers a choice between familiarity and practicality. There is, without question, a certain comfort and stability in maintaining familiar patterns of thought and behavior. Stepping outside that zone of comfort and familiarity necessarily involves moving into a realm of unfamiliar experience that may seem really scary, an uncomfortable in-between realm. You don't know whether to go back to what was familiar but frightening or to forge ahead toward what may be frightening simply because it's unfamiliar.

In a sense, the uncertainty surrounding the choice to recognize your full potential is similar to what several of my students have told me about ending an abusive relationship: there's a certain reluctance or sense of failure associated with letting go of the relationship.

The primary difference between severing an abusive relationship and entering the path of Buddhist practice is that when you enter the path of Buddhist practice you're ending an abusive relationship with yourself. When you choose to recognize your true potential, you gradually begin to find yourself belittling yourself less frequently, your opinion of yourself becomes more positive and wholesome, and your sense of confidence and sheer joy at being alive increases. At the same time, you begin to recognize that everyone around you has the same potential, whether they know it or not. Instead of dealing with them as threats or adversaries, you'll find yourself able to recognize and empathize with their fear and unhappiness. You'll spontaneously respond to them in ways that emphasize solutions rather than problems.

Ultimately, joyful wisdom comes down to choosing between the discomfort of becoming aware of your mental afflictions and the discomfort of being ruled by them. I can't promise you that it will always be pleasant simply to rest in the awareness of your thoughts, feelings, and sensations—and to recognize them as interactive creations of your own mind and body. In fact, I can pretty much guarantee that looking at yourself this way will be, at times, extremely unpleasant.

But the same can be said about beginning anything new, whether it's going to the gym, starting a job, or beginning a diet. The first few months are always difficult. It's hard to learn all the skills you need to master a job; it's hard to motivate yourself to exercise; and it's hard to eat healthfully every day. But after a while the difficulties subside; you start to feel a sense of pleasure or accomplishment, and your entire sense of self begins to change.

Meditation works the same way. For the first few days you might feel very good, but after a week or so, practice becomes a trial. You can't find the time, sitting is uncomfortable, you can't focus, or you just get tired. You hit a wall, as runners do when they try to add an extra half mile to their exercise. The body says, "I can't," while the mind says, "I should." Neither voice is particularly pleasant; in fact, they're both a bit demanding.

Buddhism is often referred to as the "middle way" because it offers a third option. If you just can't focus on a sound or a candle flame for one second longer, then by all means stop. Otherwise, meditation becomes a chore. You'll end up thinking, "Oh no, it's 7:15. I have to sit down and cultivate awareness". No one ever progresses that way. On the other hand, if you think you could go on for another minute or two, then go on. You may be surprised by what you learn. You might discover a particular thought or feeling behind your resistance that you didn't want to acknowledge. Or you may simply find that you can actually rest your mind longer than you thought you could. That discovery alone can give you greater confidence in yourself.

But the best part of all is that no matter how long you practice, or what method you use, every technique of Buddhist meditation ultimately generates compassion. Whenever you look at your mind, you can't help but recognize your similarity to those around you. When you see your own desire to be happy, you can't avoid seeing the same desire in others. And when you look clearly at your own fear, anger, or aversion, you can't help but see that everyone around you feels the same fear, anger, and aversion. This is wisdom—not in the sense of book learning, but in the awakening of the heart, the recognition of our connection to others, and the road to joy.
