

## Three Articles on Training with Depression

*At the end of February 2012 a weekend retreat was held on the topic of training with depression. It was initiated by Eric Nicholson of the Newcastle Meditation group in consultation with the Guest department at Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey. Part of Ministeracres retreat centre in Co. Durham was hired for the retreat and two senior monks from the Abbey were invited to join the retreat on the Saturday. One of the main aims of the weekend was to “establish ongoing support for congregation members who experience or have experienced depression and/or anxiety...” and there is now a support group set up (see note to the first two articles).*

*The third article is an edited version of a facebook discussion that started with a few open questions from laypeople regarding anti-depressants, and developed from there, with contributions from various members of the Sangha.*

## Bhaisajyaguru and the Ministeracres Retreat

Chris Turner

—Lancaster, England—UK—

I arrived on the Friday evening just before the evening meal at Ministeracres<sup>1</sup>, an impressive 18th Century mansion house set amongst beautiful and inspiring gardens and woodlands. I am usually quite anxious when coming to a new place and about to meet new people, yet I felt at peace and that the decision to come on this retreat was ‘what was good to do’ as this tradition of

Sōtō Zen often says. Brief introductions and efforts to establish relationships were made as we enjoyed the nourishing fare offered by the kitchen there. We were made very welcome by the residing sisters and priests as well as the volunteers who helped serve us throughout the weekend. The whole atmosphere of Minsteracres was very welcoming and accepting during the whole of our stay and every effort was made to make our stay as comfortable and as enjoyable as possible.

After the meal we came together in a meeting room allocated to us for the whole weekend. An altar had been set up by Eric there. Amongst the Buddha statue and candles was a picture of Achalanatha. Later that weekend Eric described it as an inspiring example, a figure of immovability surrounded by fire, with sword in hand, cutting through the flames of delusion and suffering. On reflection I also see this as a powerful figure to keep in mind as we each individually face our struggles with anxiety and/or depression. Eric also introduced another figure that evening that has become very inspiring to me: Bhaisajyaguru. He read an article by Rev. Master Meian Elbert. Bhaisajyaguru, also called the Medicine Buddha, is seen as a figure offering the medicine of the Dharma which can help us to heal ourselves no matter what the conditions and circumstances are. We just have to be willing to accept help in whatever form it takes. This retreat and what has resulted from it, for me, can all be seen as manifestations of the work of Bhaisajyaguru. It is the Medicine Buddha in action offering help, support and healing to all who need it. As Rev. Master Meian says

We're all aspects of Bhaisajyaguru, the Buddha of healing. We all give healing medicine without even thinking about it; we all receive it from others.<sup>2</sup>

We need to be open to giving and receiving help to and from others and the world.



*Bhaisajyaguru, the Buddha of healing  
(from a Taiwanese Scroll)*

The weekend renewed my commitment to the path of Buddhism and to sitting regularly. The following words from ‘Rules for Meditation’ have recently presented a living daily kōan:

Understand clearly that the Truth appears naturally and then your mind will be free from doubts and vacillation.<sup>3</sup>

For it is doubts and vacillation I have been experiencing more and more of, especially since I went to Jukai last year and made a formal commitment to follow the Buddhist Path. I have sometimes felt very enthusiastic for training and at other times have been really struggling with whether sitting was actually doing me any good! A lot of my struggles with depression and anxiety generally arise when I have had a period of disturbed sleep, which has been a regular theme the last few years. This has led to a complex relationship with sitting and Buddhism in general. My constant problem of general tiredness and sometimes exhaustion from a very restless sleep, has led me to look for answers and ways of understanding suffering. Buddhism in general and this tradition of Sōtō Zen in particular have helped me immensely. However, ironically, I also started to notice that I would often have increased disturbed sleep the more I sat. It is with this paradox I went to this retreat with, and am still facing now. It has, however, led me to explore the figures of Achalantha and Bhaisajyaguru especially and to consider that:

Often when we begin to train, we find that the spiritual stuff comes up and we feel a wreck. You know: “I used to be a nice person, now I’m a mess; I used to be a happy person, now I’m a wreck...” Physical illness frequently comes up too — we start to train and we get sick. Karma is arising to be dealt with and it

comes up in both the physical and spiritual form. It's all linked together...<sup>4</sup>

This has really spoken to me. Maybe I can learn to see my suffering as simply the result of past unresolved aspects of my ever-changing flow of being, or actions that need to be dealt with—a purification of negative karma even. Not that I am suggesting looking at this purification in terms of a judgment of myself, but simply an explanation of the way things are. It is also an opportunity to learn from what I am experiencing and to develop myself spiritually, to become more loving and compassionate. Can one truly become a Bodhisattva without understanding the pain and suffering that others go through? Depression and anxiety have given me a greater insight into the suffering I see others experiencing. I feel I am more sensitive to others who may be experiencing struggles in their own mind with depression, anxiety or other forms of negative habitual thinking.

I found that the schedule for the weekend was just right. It was relaxed and informal most of the time with aspects of formal practice interspersed. We had regular periods of sitting throughout the weekend and we recited the Five Thoughts before our meals and Vespers at the end of our evening sitting periods. On the Saturday morning we also had a Short Morning Service led by Rev. Master Leandra and Rev. Roland followed by a talk by Rev. Leandra. However there were also periods of free time, when we could choose to rest or explore Ministeracres' grounds and the surrounding area. In talking to others who went, it seems this was a shared sentiment about the weekend, and that a similar type of schedule would be beneficial for any future retreats together.

I felt Rev. Leandra's talk gave me a lot of food for thought and echoed quite a bit of my own experience with both anxiety and depression. I do feel I have learnt from my depression and anxiety over the years and it has motivated me to train if, nothing else. Rev. Leandra spoke of how trying to find causes for our depression (and anxiety for that matter) creates the illusion of a solid self. We create a story of our past, or our life now, that we believe to be true.

It reminds me of a few years ago when I was struggling with a seemingly solid and overwhelming depression. I went to Throssel Hole and I talked to someone there who had found out they had been diagnosed with cancer earlier that year. She said she sat with the obvious feelings of fear that seemed to fill her. She then said that although when she sat these feelings of fear did come up regularly, she was struck by the fact that the next minute she could be thinking about what she was going to have for tea! Over those few days I was at Throssel I saw for myself that the depression I felt was so overwhelming and seemed to permeate my body wasn't as solid as I thought. Thoughts of regret, guilt and dread were interspersed with happy memories of past times or songs I liked etc. I came away feeling less affected by those thoughts and emotions as I stopped believing in their absolute validity as a reflection of how things really were. In zazen we can see the moment-to-moment changes in ourselves and in the world as we learn to pay attention (as Rev. Leandra said in her talk<sup>5</sup>). I took solace from the fact that Rev. Leandra felt antidepressants could sometimes provide a way for our minds to find a stable place in order to be able to sit and discover our freedom. I have recently gone back onto antidepressants and so far they do seem to have helped me find a bit more

stability. I also found it reassuring to find out that a few monks are themselves on antidepressants and I personally would be interested to know how they train with their anxiety and/or depression in such an intense environment as a monastery.

It may seem rather strange to say that a weekend organised solely to come together as a group of individuals, to learn how to train with feelings of depression and anxiety was fun and had us all laughing, but it was! I feel personally, it is essential in dealing with anxiety and depression, to have a very good sense of humour. Firstly, because one needs a balance to the darkness and the sometimes overwhelming sense of the difficulty of life one often feels, but also because one can't help but have a sense of humour when one sees how ridiculously serious we can be one minute and then our mind shows us actually that we needn't be so serious after all. The mind itself can be so fickle in its seriousness—as the above example shows! Even little things like the Methodist Women's group who stayed at Ministeracres that same weekend made up of about 40 women and one sole man cannot help but bring a smile—to my face at least!

I feel it was a very good and useful weekend meeting others who were experiencing similar struggles as me; it was helpful to know I am not alone in the difficulties I face at times within my own mind. It is funny how different you can feel when depression or anxiety strikes, making you feel isolated and that no one cares. It is good to know and be surrounded by others that prove you are not alone. It is also good to hear teachings that reaffirm that there is help and that there is love and compassion within the universe and within ourselves; that we can connect to and be part of the flow of love and compassion that is the reality of the way things actually are.

I feel next time it might be better to come together for slightly longer so we can get to know each other better and have a better exchange of ideas. Over the weekend we discussed the possibility of having a ‘buddy system’; having someone we can personally go to when we feel in a vulnerable place. However, since we hadn’t got to know each other that well it was decided to set up a Google group in the meantime. After some ideas as to the name of the group, ‘Zen Well-Being’<sup>6</sup> was chosen. It was set up by Joyce Bradley who invites those interested to join the group. It is a virtual forum where people who are training with anxiety and/or depression can get to know others who may be experiencing similar difficulties and discuss any issues and exchange ideas on how to deal with them. The group is working well and has quite a few members now with frequent exchanges and introductions being made. There is a friendly, open and compassionate feel to the group which will hopefully provide a virtual, if not corporeal, form of support for those who use it until we can meet together in person.

When we meet as a group next we can build on ground established in the ‘Zen Well-Being’ group and be in a better position to potentially begin a ‘buddy system’ if that seems appropriate. Due to the efforts of Eric and Joyce we now have a group where those of us who struggle with dark and insecure thoughts may come together to guide and support each other. May Bhaisajyuguru heal and strengthen all those who use the group now and in the future.

*Notes*

1. Ministeracres Retreat Centre, nr. Consett, Co.Durham
2. Meian Elbert, Rev. Master. The Medicine of the Dharma from The Journal of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives (Winter 2010-2011). Also ‘Bhaisajya-guru’s Healing Medicine’ talk at <http://www.shastaabbey.org/teachings-RMmeian.html>
3. From Rules for Meditation, Taken from *Scriptures and Ceremonies at Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey*’ booklet (Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey, 2005), p. 34).
4. Meian Elbert, Ibid.
5. Robertshaw, Leandra, Rev. Master. Training with Depression Parts 1 and 2, talks at <http://www.throssel.org.uk/dharma-talks>
6. [zen-well-being@googlegroups.com](mailto:zen-well-being@googlegroups.com) contact Joyce Bradley at [joyce.bradley1@gmail.com](mailto:joyce.bradley1@gmail.com) to get invited to the group.

# Is Depression a Gift?

Eric Nicholson

—Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, England—UK—

*Until we have actually been depressed we do not realise that there is a great difference between being depressed and being unhappy. When we are unhappy... we still feel in contact with the rest of the world. When we are depressed we feel cut off from the rest of the world. When we are unhappy, even if there is no one there to comfort us, we comfort ourselves. When we are depressed we do not comfort ourselves. Instead we hurt ourselves... We become cut off from ourselves. We become our own worst enemy.*

*I would rather have a physical illness—any physical illness rather than be depressed.*<sup>1</sup>

These two quotations from a book about depression show that clinical depression is clearly a debilitating state of mind. Fortunately I have never had to be hospitalized for depression but I've suffered from depression for most of my adult life.

In a recent lay-initiated retreat where the focus was on training with depression it was suggested that depression could be seen as a gift. People who experience depression will probably regard this as a cruel joke. A gift is the last thing we would think of! However later in this article I hope to unpick in what ways depression *could* be seen as a gift. During the retreat it was also stated that you can investigate the causes of your depression but that it is important not to get stuck in your story. I would certainly go along with that and add that there are advan-

tages and disadvantages in examining your past. On balance I've found it helpful to see the causes of my difficulties although I see the danger in simplifying, distorting and setting something (the past, which was fluid) in stone. So with those provisos, the following outlines what I believe to be the origin of my depression (this is very much a thumbnail sketch of what I understand to be the most *obvious* causes, there are no doubt other factors involved as well).

When I was 12 years old I was sent to a co-educational boarding school. As a 12 year old I was unable to recognize or deal with the stressful feelings that this engendered. Feelings of abandonment and helplessness were most likely prominent. To compensate, I found release (took false refuge) in sexual fantasies, obsessive thinking, cynicism, individualism and the imaginative world of books. This was, I now realise, a way of giving myself something as a substitute for the love that I wasn't receiving. My parents made the decision to send me away because they had been appointed residential managers in a Dr. Barnardo's Home. They told me at the time that they thought it would be better for me to go to boarding school because they wouldn't have time to devote to me!

Some of the teachers ridiculed and criticized pupils at the slightest opportunity. There was no nurturing of the spiritual being and no pastoral care. I believe I became institutionalized, to a certain extent, as during holidays I returned to another institution—the Dr. Barnardo's Home.

It was not unmitigated hell; I found some activities intrinsically enjoyable such as art, sport and walking in The Lake District. However, I believe the seeds of my adult difficulties were planted and cultivated during the ensuing seven years.

(Even among these seeds there were other seeds; incredibly and ironically, the motto of the school was: We Seek The Truth! In my early twenties I became more and more obsessed with searching for a purpose and meaning to life). The confusion, anger and resentment, which would be normal reactions to these conditions, were repressed and manifested as depression in later life. Other consequences were an almost constant feeling of loneliness and alienation, a mistrust of people and feelings of unworthiness and shame. Perhaps the ‘progenitor’ of all these consequences was a blocking of the normal flow of emotions. If I were to describe depression, one of the qualities I’d highlight is the feeling of being blocked; it is no coincidence that I feel a blockage and tension in my neck, head and shoulders during zazen.

I can now see when I’ve acted willfully throughout life, in a desperate attempt to hold onto pleasure and avoid pain. Although this karma has mostly harmed myself, others have been adversely affected because no person is an island.

The Buddhist way is to look at the broader picture and not apportion blame: blaming neither others nor oneself. Although this is difficult, I find that this is where the reflective, analytical mind can help. With fifty years’ hindsight, I can now see and accept—at least intellectually and at a deeper level sometimes—that many forces were involved. My parents were not acting out of malice; they were simply pursuing their own careers and doing the best they could at the time. They loved me but because of their conditioning, they found it extremely difficult to manifest that love. The school was reflective of that particular time and tradition, the late-fifties to mid-sixties. The

teachers were conditioned to act in the ways they did. I reacted to the stressful situation in particular ways because of my personality, which was in itself a fluid entity, partly a result of nature and partly of nurture. For example, what if I'd had a more assertive character and refused to go to the school? A whole different set of circumstances would have occurred. Then there were the cultural influences of the time. I could go on. . .

So, there are advantages in facing and interpreting our past; it provides an explanation, albeit a constructed, subjective one. Discovering and accepting that there are multiple causes for our personal karma and that everything is in a state of flux, helps us to see beyond the merely personal and see phenomena as impermanent, unsatisfactory and non-self (*anicca, dukkha* and *anatta*).

The disadvantages include the tendency to hold onto any explanation as our story. Before long we may create an identity for ourselves as 'a depressed person.' Another danger is to 'catastrophise' and draw conclusions about ourselves: "I was okay until such and such happened; I've made a mess of my life; I'll never feel at peace; I'm a hopeless case; I'd be better off dead." If you are like me you may often mistake your world of words-and-thoughts as reality. When you are subjected to such an onslaught of words, remember the advice: don't completely believe anything you think! And also from a Buddhist scripture: "the whole world is tormented by words." <sup>2</sup>

Although I stated above that I agree with the idea that we shouldn't get stuck with our 'wounded child story', that doesn't mean to say I have found it easy to put this into practice. Like a dog returning to its vomit I often find it difficult to let go of the past. I'm sure it has to do with forgiving ourselves; we think that

because of something we've done in the past that we are spiritually damaged forever. This is far from the truth. We must find forgiveness for ourselves eventually. And as with most things in practice, this is not something we can simply think into existence.

I remember at a question and answer session at Throssel being cautioned against digging for causes of our suffering. It's all too easy to use our obsessive thinking habit to introspect and dwell on our past mistakes in a way that compounds suffering. In order for karma to be cleansed, it is enough to regret what we did in the past and resolve to try our best not to repeat that particular mistake and trust the rest to zazen and keeping the Precepts. As we meditate, memories will often come up, during meditation or afterwards, quite naturally. As it says in *The Litany of the Great Compassionate One*, "It is pure, it is that which makes all beings victorious, and cleanses the path of all existence."<sup>3</sup> This is the difference, as I understand it, between therapy, or the psychological approach, and the spiritual approach. The fact that we continue doing zazen demonstrates trust in something beyond the rational.

We were born with a sense of our own truth, of being ourselves, and with a sense of belonging, of being at home in the world. Then, bit by bit, we were forced to deny our own truth and to give up being ourselves. As we gave up being ourselves we lost our relationship to the world. We and it became alien, 'A stranger and afraid in a world I never made.'<sup>4</sup>

This is not a quotation from a Buddhist writer, but Dorothy Rowe once again. Each of us experiences depression and/or anxiety in our own unique way although there are some com-

mon denominators. Mine has been characterized by feelings of meaninglessness and futility—and a separation from others and the world. At the same time I knew that peace of mind was my birthright. I spent a lot of time muddying the waters.

Reverend Master Jiyu-Kennett often described Buddhist Training as “the truth, the whole truth, and anything else that works”! I would now like to describe how I manage ‘my’ depression in terms of both Buddhist practice and “anything else that works.”

In Buddhism we are told to stop trying to fix things when it comes to our own suffering. On the other hand there are many tools such as Cognitive Behaviour Therapy we can use. I don’t see these statements as contradictory. There are wise ways of helping ourselves, and there are many aids we can use, including CBT or mindfulness therapies. However, we must avoid trying desperately to get rid of our depression or looking for quick fixes. This amounts to aversion, the same as pushing away thoughts in zazen. So, what does it mean to truly face our depression and accept it? It does not mean resignation. To me acceptance means no resistance. We don’t necessarily have to like what we accept: this makes life a whole lot easier! I prefer not to feel lonely but if I don’t put up any resistance to the feeling, and don’t compound the feeling with thoughts, I find that it eventually dissipates. I see the feeling as insubstantial and not as threatening to my well being. I may have to do this hundreds of times but each time I am seeing more into its nature and my relationship to it. (Rev. Master Leandra discusses loneliness in a talk she gave during the retreat, *Training with Depression*).<sup>5</sup> If every time I feel lonely I seek out a friend I’m never going

to understand how I am attached to and averse to the feelings. It seems that whatever is ‘hard to bear’, is a big clue to our personal kōan. It’s a slow process but I’m gradually moving from a position of aversion towards being alone, to accepting each situation as it is, without stressful commentary. Patient endurance and determination are very much part of the process. We can apply this approach to any of the so called negative emotions: anger, resentment, arrogance, envy, greed; whatever our cocktail of karma is.

During the weekend retreat we had a framed picture of Achalanatha on the altar (see photo facing page 1). He is not a pretty sight but has an incredible sense of determination as he stands upright amidst the flames of hate, greed and delusion. He holds a sword in his right hand to cut through all delusion. For me he personifies Right Effort and demonstrates that at some point we all have to go willingly into the flames of our own greed, anger and delusion. We will not be destroyed by the flames—on the contrary we will be purified.

It is only now, at the age of sixty five, that I occasionally catch myself feeling at ease when I’m on my own. This may seem a small step but when I reflect, for a good deal of my life I’ve felt an uncomfortable dis-ease; an inability to be content. Now I am able to catch a fleeting glimpse of what Rev. Master Daishin says in *Sitting Buddha*:

In time you will come to see that you are complete along with the whole universe. Nothing in your past can prevent you from knowing your true nature now so long as you are willing to change.<sup>6</sup>

The birds do not care if we are depressed, and they do not judge us. If we are quiet and still, they will sit near us and sing to us of hope and beauty, when we are hard pressed to find either in our life. The earth will support us and a tree will shelter us.<sup>7</sup>

During our retreat it was agreed that sometimes it is better to do something practical rather than sit formally in zazen. I have often opted to go for a walk in times of emotional turmoil. If our minds are racing it may ground us to do some baking, go for a run or do some other physical activity. When walking I sometimes focus on the sensation of my feet touching the ground. If troubled by obsessive thoughts we can recite or sing a Buddhist verse; out loud if in the countryside or away from people! I find that it is almost impossible to believe in the separate self if I go out and look at the night sky. It brings a wonderful sense of ‘otherness’; for me a very reliable release from the ‘little self’. Similarly, to listen to a skylark singing or see a red kite soaring on summer thermals gladdens my heart.

I start each day with three full bows and recite a Buddhist verse to commit myself to train for the day. I usually meditate formally after breakfast and in the evening. (If I’m feeling *very* low, I don’t force myself to sit.) I try and go about daily activities mindfully. I find that if my mind is in the clouds or I’m feeling resentful or whatever—when I’m in the kitchen for example—just opening and closing cupboards *quietly* helps to anchor me in the present.

Engaging with others is an important area of my practice. A. B. Curtiss even asserts that one of the benefits of depression is a deeper connection with people:

I know that my experience of depression, in which I always felt completely alone, is responsible for a much more profound connection with people—a connection that I would otherwise not have been able to make.<sup>8</sup>

During the last year I've been going to a singing group for the over sixties.

It's Tuesday morning. I join the others who are all chattering. I turn to my neighbour and make a comment. He doesn't seem to respond. I feel ignored. I know this feeling well; it is uncomfortable. It triggers familiar thoughts: "They don't like me. I don't fit in." This time however, I don't allow the thoughts to proliferate. It is no problem; it is just how it is. Later, I chat and there is no feeling of resistance.

Catching thoughts like this before they escalate into full scale self-loathing becomes possible after a while. The interaction with others allows us to see where we are holding onto an image, an idea of self. As my depression is characterized by a disconnection from others, it is helpful for me to choose activities in which I interact with people. It is not all grim self-observation; sometimes I actually relax and enjoy myself!

I'd like now to briefly describe other activities or choices I make which come under the heading, 'anything else that works.' As a lack of purpose and an inability to enjoy life were ingredients in my conditioning, anything which redresses this is valuable. I volunteer in a countryside visitor centre where I engage with the public. I help with monitoring red kites in the Derwent Valley, Gateshead. I go to a yoga class once a week. I walk with a walking group once a fortnight. I also visit Throssel regularly

and go to my local meditation group. All these activities combine purpose, engaging with people and enjoyment.

Maybe for someone else there might be a need to socialize less; their life may be too hectic; or someone may feel overwhelmed by their children's needs. I found it helpful to do a 'self-check' and 'activity plan' when I retired last year. I knew that too much time on my own was a potential danger. Planning and self-assessment of this kind is not at odds with our Buddhist Practice.

It can seem like working in a coalmine at times, but neither is it all bad. Even depression has its value within the sea of Buddha Nature.<sup>9</sup>

Even if we can't accept the idea that depression might be a gift, we can surely view the experience as the fertile soil and manure in which our lotus plants grow. Put simply, we learn about ourselves and life by confronting and allowing the painful aspects of depression to be transformed.

The word 'gift' is interesting in itself. A gift is something freely given without ulterior motive. For something to be a gift there has to be a recipient. The recipient needs to accept the gift otherwise it is no longer a gift. So, semantically, the words 'gift' and 'acceptance' go together. I am reminded of a happening in our family (remembered with wry amusement now after many years) which seemed to typify my mother's rather 'absolute' interpretation of always speaking the truth! My brother gave her a vase once for her birthday. As it happened, she didn't exactly take to this particular vase and so my brother ended up taking it home himself. I wonder if our relationship to depression is rather like this. First we reject the experience, then a kind

of resignation may set in and finally we may come to a deeper acceptance.

A few weeks after the *Training with Depression Retreat* I asked retreatants if they could say in what ways depression could be seen as a gift. Here are two people's responses:

I used to be rather attached to being 'independent and strong' and relying on myself. Depression has made me more interdependent. This means I rely on others more, and they on me. It's a humanizing experience. It is also a gift in the sense that my family and friends enjoy looking after me.

I feel although depression at times is awful, I do think it makes me more sensitive to the pain of others and I can see more clearly when others are struggling and feeling down. When I start to come out of it I feel I have a renewed appreciation for life and it definitely informs my humour... I think also that without my periods of depression and anxiety I would not have been as motivated to develop spiritually. My questioning of life and the pain and suffering I feel has led me to Buddhism.

And another quote from the *Facebook*<sup>10</sup> dialogue:

I have experienced a 'happy depression', and would consider it a very normal result of meditation practice, and becoming familiar with the deeper workings of your mind. Depression as an illness might continue on for however long, but within it you can nevertheless find stillness, acceptance, and peace within what is. In other words, peace of mind comes from the effort of accepting and loving all parts of ourselves, which we can do regardless of other conditions which come to bear on us as fragile human beings, and that would include depression.

In a sense there is nothing special about depression; it is just a specific form of *dukkha*. There is a lovely description from the Pali Canon which evokes the universality of suffering.

Which do you think, O monks, is more: the flood of tears which, weeping and wailing, you have shed upon this long way, hurrying and hastening through this round of rebirths, united with the undesired, separated from the desired; this or the waters of the four great oceans? . . . you have indeed shed more tears upon this long way than there is water in the four great oceans.<sup>11</sup>

If we can sometimes regard the painful feelings of depression in this more universal, less self-regarding way we can see them in a broader perspective. We know that when we are in the grip of anxiety or despair the sense of a separate self is accentuated. In practice this is not easy but some part of us *knows* the suffering, separate self is a phantom, created by the depressed mind.

In this article I have described some ways I try to ‘work with’ depression. Learning to trust others and engage in life is a big part of the process for me. Learning to talk to others about our feelings and difficulties helps, and we have set up a Google Group, ‘Zen Well-Being’<sup>12</sup> with this in mind. My deep wish is that all who suffer from depression or anxiety may find a path through the darkness, may go beyond and realise the Truth for themselves.

*Notes*

1. Rowe, Dorothy. *The Depression Handbook*, (Collins, 1991) Preface and p.7.
2. Conze, Edward. (Translator), *Saraha's Treasury of Songs in Buddhist Scriptures*, (Penguin Classics, Reprinted 1967) p. 177.
3. Jiyu -Kennett, Rev. Master P.T.N.H. *Liturgy of the OBC for the Laity*, (Shasta Abbey Press, out of print).
4. Dorothy Rowe, op cit., p.101.
5. [www.throssel.org.uk/dharma-talks](http://www.throssel.org.uk/dharma-talks)
6. Morgan, Rev. M. Daishin. *Sitting Buddha*, (Throssel Hole Press, 2004) p.4 3.
7. Martin, Philip. *The Zen Path Through Depression*, (Harper One, 1999) p. 123.
8. Curtis, A.B. *Depression is a Choice*, (Hyperion, 2001) p. 433.
9. [www.facebook.com/groups/contemplatives](https://www.facebook.com/groups/contemplatives) (Some OBC members' discussion.)
10. Ibid.
11. Buddhist Publication Society, *Samyutta Nikaya* [15,3] Quoted in *The Wheel Publication, No. 20, Online Edition, 2008*.
12. If you experience depression/anxiety and think you would benefit from this support group you can contact Joyce Bradley at [joyce.bradley1@gmail.com](mailto:joyce.bradley1@gmail.com)

## Training with Depression: a Conversation

Rev. Master Seikai Luebke and a group of OBC Sangha

—*Pine Mountain Buddhist Temple, CA, USA and [www.facebook.com/groups/contemplatives](http://www.facebook.com/groups/contemplatives)*—

*What follows is an edited version of a discussion among OBC Sangha on Facebook. It is published with permission from everyone who took part and first appeared on the blog [miahanson.com](http://miahanson.com).*

*Rev. Seikai:* That's been the story of my life: training with Depression. Love and merit to everyone who is suffering from it. It can seem like working in a coal mine at times, but neither is it all bad. Even depression has its value within the sea of Buddha Nature.

*Question:* Rev. Master Seikai, what is depression?

*Rev. Seikai:* That depends on what paradigm you choose in describing or defining depression. On the level of neuroscience, they have discovered all sorts of things such as the lack of neuro-transmitters, for instance dopamine and norepinephrine, between brain synapses. So on a molecular level it is a disruption in the normal flow of electrical impulses within the brain. On the level of psychology, there is a list of symptoms that define depression, and to be diagnosed as a condition one

needs to have experienced two or three such symptoms for a minimum period of time, e.g. two weeks.

On a spiritual level, depression or melancholia can be described as a heavy weight which presses down upon ones spirit, a burden or weight which makes life seem hopeless; whether it is directly a karmic result of some human behavior in the past, I simply don't know. More likely, it seems to me, it is a human condition which accompanies the working out of a heavy sort of karma.

In my experience I would say that the temptation to despair or indulge in helpless or hopeless oriented thinking is central to depression; it is thus possible to train oneself away from despair, which has a great lightening effect on the condition of depression, even though it might not make it go away altogether.

With regard to the working out of karma, karma is experienced mainly as feeling, and in this case it is feeling particularly bad, bad about oneself, not believing that life can or will ever get better. The intensity of this feeling often leads people to commit suicide. Isolation seems to be the hallmark of depression, and learning to talk to others about it, seeking help, taking refuge in ones friends, generally alleviates it.

I had to learn to go talk with someone early on in the onset of a depression wave, and that skill, an acquired skill, has made all the difference. Since it is a huge motivator for training, depression has an upside. It is not a purely black, debilitating phenomenon.

*Question:* Thank you for your comment. Do you know what I have difficulty with? Having fun. Most of my working and free time is spent ruminating about stuff. It makes me annoyingly earnest and too serious to be happy. I have Swedish heritage, and think I have Calvinist karma! It has been described as “a system of socially imposed depression... the task for the living was to constantly examine ‘the loathsome abominations that lie in his bosom’, seeking to uproot the sinful thoughts that are a sure sign of damnation... the only form of relief from this anxious work of self-examination was hard labour... idleness or pleasure seeking was contemptible sin.”<sup>1</sup> Recognise anything?

*Rev. Seikai:* The more people (e.g. the Sangha) can work together to eliminate the stigma associated with depression, the better. Moving away from the assumption that there is something willful about depression—that you are that way because you indulge in some sort of dark view of life—will help both those who suffer from it and those who are in a position to help those in their lives who do. Depression as an illness is bad enough—in fact it’s horrific—but to then have the people around you blame you or avoid you makes it all the worse, so then it becomes a vicious cycle which feeds upon itself. So, to recognise that as human beings we all need each other, and what we primarily need is love and understanding, makes the world a better place and life not quite so dark for a person in a depression.

Regarding Calvinism, I was raised in the Lutheran tradition, which was sort of the spearhead of the Protestant Reformation, and upon which Calvinism and the like followed; the idea the suffering was ennobling to “the soul”, that because we are

fallen creatures in need of redemption we need to grovel in the dirt while we beg our saviour for forgiveness, etc. gained credence in the 16th and 17th centuries. It is a form of asceticism, really, and a particularly damaging one given that it destroys self esteem and paves the way for self-hatred.

From a Buddhist perspective, however, it is a preoccupation with the self—albeit it a fallen or “depraved” self—that makes it an error on the spiritual level. I can’t begin to recount the number of hours I have spent in meditation learning to love myself and let go of all the self condemning thoughts which perpetuate the illusion of an evil, bad, fallen or depraved self. Thousands. But it does work. My master, Rev. Master Jiyu, gave me the key to the door when she said “love yourself when you criticise yourself.” It was dead on, a direct hit for me. It is a matter of putting that gem of wisdom into practice again and again, tens of thousands of times as long as I live.

*Question:* Wonderful points. Just one question. . . I thought I did “indulge in some sort of dark view of life”, and that that is a big reason for my suffering? What I’d also like to work out is when it’s wise to “choose not to go there,” and when not going there is actually repressing something quite important.

*Rev. Seikai:* To the extent that we indulge in dark thoughts that have despair, self hatred and the like embedded in them, we prolong and feed energy into the condition of depression. That does not necessarily mean that you brought the condition on yourself in the first place; often it comes about as a result of a survival strategy that we employ as very young people. But meanwhile, we have to assume responsibility for how we react

to its symptoms and regard it as the stuff of training in this human realm (or not).

So the matter of choosing not to go there is a delicate balance between not pushing away that you feel bad, horrible, or whatever you feel, but also not grasping in and indulging those feelings either. We humans tend to indulge in our bad feelings just as much as we indulge in feeling good, e.g. eating chocolate, ice cream, having sex, going to the amusement park or whatever.

So it's about learning to find what Rev. Master Jiyu called "the third position," which is one of basic acceptance and neutrality towards what we feel makes it possible to transcend the pain of depression and slowly convert it into pure faith. Choosing not to go there is to choose not to indulge in the flat-out darkness and despair of depression, but it is balanced by the willingness to experience pain and let it go. We all have a pain threshold, of course, but the human mind has this wonderful quality of not allowing so much to engulf us to the point where we simply cannot handle it.

Within the spiritual work that we do on ourselves, this is a principle which appears to be in operation, and is an aspect of the Compassion that Fills the Universe (Quan Yin<sup>2</sup>).

*Question:* When you say that the human mind has a quality of not allowing so much to overwhelm us so that we can't handle it... what about people who self-harm or commit suicide, or whose minds can't handle it and they become psychotic and end up developing schizophrenia and other such things?

*Comment from the group:* According to the Swiss Psychologist Carl Jung, psychological illnesses *are* ways the mind has of coping with intolerable stress and difficulties. Rather than take too much pain and stress, the mind might prefer to split into multiple personalities, for example. When the stress and unbearable pain have passed, the mind regains its integrity. Of course in some cases the driving force for mental illness is not external worries, but internal chemical abnormalities and imbalances.

*Rev. Seikai:* I would agree with the last comment. Not being trained in psychology, I can't answer that with any authority. But having worked with people who are basically stable mentally and emotionally, but are working through whatever buried traumas—or for that matter, karmic memories, which boils down to the same thing—this seems to be an operating principle.

Obviously, some people think that they simply cannot handle the intensity of what they are experiencing, or in fact it is simply too much for the brain to handle at once, and so as noted above, the brain has ways of deferring the trauma to a later time when things are safer and one can go back and revisit the trauma and put it to rest. Suicide is a whole area of concern unto itself, and there is a whole spectrum from it being a very willful act to those who are in pain so unbearable that they can see no other option.

*Comments from the group:* “I have noticed that the worry/depression around external circumstances has also brought up deeper karmic tendencies to despair. Rev. Seikai’s comments on isolation & the benefits of talking to someone are so relevant—it’s taken me a couple of weeks to bring myself to the point where I can actually write this.

“The human animal is a pretty complex being. As a general rule of thumb, anything that can possibly go wrong (mentally, physically, or chemically) will go wrong in some poor person sooner or later. That’s why there are some who need a talking therapy, some who need a chemical therapy, and some who do best with a mixture of both. And it’s not just the older generation who suffer from neuroses, psychoses, personality disorders, and so on. In my time in teaching I was able to meet, chat with and teach many young people, some of whom had been sent to Special Needs units for inappropriate behaviour. When we were stumped, it was excellent to be able to call in a Child Psychologist for critical heavyweight support. Having seen the benefits and power of western psychiatry and psychology, I cannot but harbour hope that monasteries will make use of this resource whilst simultaneously continuing the excellent work they do on the spiritual level. Let’s take what’s good in western medicine and combine it with what the East does best!

“I like that you say that depression is a huge motivator for training R M Seikai, I have at times felt incredibly grateful for having experienced depression (which would have seemed unbelievable before I started meditating) because I felt like it pushed me towards training, and I have wondered that if I had not had these difficult feelings that perhaps I would be going

through life getting by ok, and therefore more easily getting lost in things because I don't have this thing happening which pushes me to look deeper. Having experienced relatively long periods of feeling much happier and stable since meditating, I have sometimes begun to feel a lack of motivation for meditation until the depression returns, and even to the extent that I have worried that the depression might not come back!!—and that therefore I wouldn't be motivated any more. It is not a wish to feel depressed as such, and it is such a surprise to me after years of wishing that things would be different so that I could just 'get on with my life', and after being so resentful for having these experiences, that I should feel gratitude for this such horrible thing (sometimes, not always, especially when I am experiencing it!). I seem to be waiting for a 'better' type of motivation nonetheless, as to feel reliant on feeling depressed for motivation doesn't feel to be a good thing! Thoughts anyone..?!

*Rev. Seikai:* Motivation is a somewhat slippery business, isn't it? On the one hand, depression can be a powerful motivator, and as such has an upside; on the other hand, if one works hard for a while and improves mentally and emotionally as a result, and then, having achieved a specific goal you slack off of the effort, you can kind of slump into a bit of complacency. So how to keep a fire going that will sustain your practice over the long haul?

I would imagine that for most people, going through this on and off cycle enough times will eventually, in and of itself, become a motivator by virtue of it being unsatisfactory on a visceral level that one simply cannot ignore. And so to have a more

ambient motivation to practice than just getting depressed will be a big asset in this rough and tumble human realm. The First Noble Truth is certainly not limited to feeling bad or to depression—just the unsatisfactoriness of living without a steady practice, once you have tasted the sweetness of practice, ought to keep giving us all a solid push.

#### *Notes*

1. Ehrenreich, Barbara. *Smile or Die*.
2. The bodhisattva of compassion: also known as Kanzeon or Avalokiteshwara [Ed].