

## The Great Enabler

© Rev. Master Myōhō Harris

Written in 2012 revised 2014

We live in a world of uncertainty and as we walk the pilgrimage that is our life, many, if not all of us, will encounter situations along the way that we find painful, deeply distressing or hard to bear. These may include feeling betrayed, let down or greatly misused by those whom we love and trust, such as a partner, parent, monk or friend. Perhaps we will have to go through a serious illness or a bereavement that turns our world upside down. Or maybe it is our own thoughts and fears that torment us, causing us to doubt ourselves and others. The only thing we can be sure of is that within every situation, no matter how dark or hopeless things may seem to be, there lies a teaching from which we can benefit and which will lead us deeper into the heart of stillness, and that if we look for it, the great enabler of Buddhist practice will reveal it to us.

Occasionally something can hit us with such force that it leaves us stunned, feeling raw, vulnerable and almost in shock. We are as a being with no shell whose world has been turned upside down. Perhaps our mind is reeling and we think that everything has been taken from us. Our sense of peace and content, faith and the comfort that comes from thinking we know the refuge are all gone. This happened to me some years ago and my experience has been that those occasions when the rug is pulled out from under us are also times of great potential, when faith deepens, training matures and much becomes possible as we respond to the call to go beyond the limits of our present ability to sit still.

But what can we do if we feel bound by those limits or entrapped by a situation or if we think our faith and ability to trust has been dented or damaged beyond repair? The scriptures tell us that there is a Refuge True in trouble, death and disaster, they reassure us that help is there when we really need it so how can we open the door and let the great enabler in?

The answer to this is through the choices we make. The practice shows us how we can choose to help ourselves by enabling the source of all

existence *to help us*. This is the purpose of the practice and it is why much is made of taking refuge in and relying upon meditation.

It helps to be clear in our minds as to what the Refuge, (that which we look to and rely upon), is and what it is not. The refuge is not another person. We take refuge *in* other people whilst being absolutely clear that they are not *the* refuge. It is not an external place, neither is it our ability to think reason and assess, and it certainly is not our opinions and emotions. The refuge is meditation and the intuitive insight and guidance, (Dharma), that come forth from that flowing. We find its source, which is also the source of faith, within our own body and mind. It is the Refuge because it is not dependent upon any one or any thing for Its existence. No one can give it to us, no one can take it from us and nothing can damage it. It is neither touched nor affected by feelings or opinions. The scriptures clearly state that,

My Pure Land will not be destroyed, though sentient beings may  
see it as utterly consumed by fire,  
Letting themselves be filled with grief and horror, distress and  
fear.<sup>1</sup>

That which brought us to the gates of training stays with us and will never leave us, no matter what happens. This is why our internal sitting place, (the Pure Land), can be relied upon and why the quality of our meditation is the same irrespective of whether we feel peaceful and contented or fearful and despairing. Before we met a monk or were shown how to meditate we could hear and recognise that inner call to find a practice that would help us. We came to training to seek for the Truth and, through that spiritual work, to do something good and meaningful with our lives. No one and no thing can prevent us from doing this.

The whole of our daily practice is there to help and enable us to rely upon that refuge. This reliance is another aspect of faith. Right from the start we begin by sitting, at regular intervals, in formal seated meditation. We sit irrespective of whether it seems interesting or dull, whether we want to or not. The point is not how we feel in the moment but that we meditate and consistently entrust ourselves to an inner source that is deeper than phenomena, deeper than the constant ebb and flow of emotions and opinions.

Within the act of just sitting is an implicit asking for help. Meditation opens up the inner airways so that a deeper truth, a more enlightened understanding than we may be presently aware of can unfold. As the

meditation flows it gently reassures us, it ‘softens’, expands, then washes away the restrictive limitations that fear and doubt have placed upon our minds. Every morning we say, “I wish to unfold the Buddha’s teaching”, the practice enables us to fulfil this wish on a moment to moment basis.

When introduced to the practice we are also instructed to call the wandering mind back to the activity of the moment. This emphasises the aspect of choice, which is extremely important in training. We are all volunteers with a free will and the practice is there to enable us to make wise choices that open up the way forward rather than cutting it off, choices which dissolve rather than add to mental distress and confusion.

Through the simple everyday activity of bringing the restless wandering mind back to being fully present in the moment we are making the choice to cease cutting ourselves off from the source of inner help that we call meditation. We are also making the choice to enable our natural awareness, (seeing clearly, sensing the difference between what is real and what is mental fabrication), to deepen. All of this strengthens our ability to stand steady in the midst of that which we find frightening, painful or hard to bare.

At those times, when our world has been turned upside down, we are ripe for change, the universe knows it and waits for just a glimmer of an indication that we are willing to be helped. In order to let the great enabler do its work we need an act of compassion towards ourselves and this is where the benefit of training comes into its own because, in the depths of our being, beneath the swirling thoughts and tangle of pain, something in us *knows* it can make that choice. It is the same choice we make every day in calling the wandering mind back to its source within the present moment. We can make choices that invite the great enabler to give us direction. This invitation can be offered by choosing to refrain from doing what we usually do. If we can drop our insistence upon using our minds in those same old dead end ways, which are all aspects of the wandering restless mind, then we make a space, an opening where enlightened insight can unfold. We can also simply say, “Please help me, I am lost and do not know what to do.” Admitting that we are lost or stuck can seem to be a sign of defeat or weakness and it can challenge the wish to see ourselves as successful people who like to have the (delusive) security that comes from thinking we are in control of everything, or we can see it as a letting go, a surrender, which is a noble act that brings relief flooding through body and mind.

There is a purity within humility that is deeply worthy of respect. Honesty opens up the way forward, it enables the mind to relax because it releases tension. Tension is created when we pretend to be other than we are.

Fear and stress can be generated when we are unacceptable to ourselves or are confused as to what our role in a particular situation is. We do not need to strive to 'be positive' or worthy of respect, we need only accept the truth that we do not know what to do. Acceptance is no more than the absence of denial. When we cease to deny what is true we *are* being positive. The scriptures speak of 'those who can be taught' and it is an act of kindness to choose to put ourselves in that category. The whole of the practice is there to enable us to do this. When we can say, "I give up trying to do it my own way, I am ready to be helped...I am ready to listen" we make a choice that enables the incoming Buddha to flow through us, bringing tender support and step by step guidance. At first it takes courage to surrender, later it becomes our joy. We don't need to know things, we just need to be fully receptive to, and *always* willing to learn from, the ever flowing incoming Buddha. That never changes. Without this we are really lost and if we are not careful we end up living our own, or a text book version of Buddhism, which is hard and cold, rather than the real thing, which has heart and requires no pretence.

When one person commits a harmful act they reveal their suffering, which can then call forth the suffering in another being. As this surfaces it can manifest as hurt, anger, judgement, blame confusion or any number of feelings which are then directed outwards towards the 'perpetrator.' The path of understanding redirects the gaze inwards, which means that the emphasis is upon looking at our own thoughts speech and actions rather than those of another.

At first we may say, "someone else did this too me, and it is not fair" and we feel justified to blame and resent. However the broader eye of contemplative reflection enables us to see that there are two different things happening here. There is what the other person does and there is what I do. If we have holes in our roof, (feelings of anger, judgement or any heated emotional response), we can blame the rain because our house gets wet or we can say that the rain has showed us where those holes are so now we can do something about them. Even if a situation needs to be reported to the appropriate authorities (and if necessary, we should not hesitate to do this and all we can, in a preceptual way, to ensure that more harm is not done), we still have to deal with our inner response, with the arising of our own suffering.

I am not being unkind or unsympathetic here, I write this not as someone who thinks they have all the answers but as one who is still learning and who knows they need what only the meditation can bring.

During my years as a monk I have had to train with many of the issues mentioned here and my experience has been that, irrespective of whether we consider ourselves to be the one who caused harm, or the one who was harmed, we have an equal responsibility to reflect carefully upon the situation to see what we can do to bring about the best possible outcome for all concerned.

A universal law is that this world is not answerable to our personal will; suffering exists and things may happen that we may find extremely painful. If our peace of mind is going to be dependent upon the actions of others then we put ourselves in a very vulnerable position. There is a limit to what we can do about how others behave, there is no limit to our ability to sit still, resolve and purify our own reactions to a situation and the great enabler is there to help us with this. If I am willing to ask “What is the deepest reality I can see here, what is asked of me in this situation?” Something will come forth from the stillness, it may be an insight or a teaching, it may be a grounding of body and mind within the stillness. Whatever it is, it comes from steady inner reflection, which is an act of great kindness towards oneself, rather than churning over thoughts in an agitated and distressed mind.

Thoughts of trust and doubt can arise at these times. What we call doubt is often a deep questioning and we should not be alarmed by this. When confusion, hurt and a lot of things that we either fear or cannot understand begin to unfold within our life and minds we lose the sense of being in control. The deep questioning that arises is a natural expression of our wish to understand and make sense of it all, and this is a good thing. When we fear, or cannot trust ourselves, we see that questioning, that seeking for the truth, as a bad thing. By releasing our minds into the flow of meditation the fear will be gently washed away and we can look, in a calm and trusting way, at all our questions (there is no such thing as a silly question), giving them the care and contemplative reflection they deserve. I have found this to be a very helpful process which has often lead to clarification and a quiet sense of inner relaxation.

If you have trusted someone and feel they have abused that trust then self doubt can arise. You may fear you are flawed in some way or wonder how you will ever be able to trust yourself or anyone else again. Trust, like compassion, is an aspect of Buddha Nature and it helps not to see it as a personal possession or attribute to be given or withheld. Instead of saying, “I used to trust but now I doubt”, which establishes a fixed position, we can

give our ability to trust self and other freedom of movement. This is very different to pretending we feel something that we don't. If you think of trust as water in a bowl, the bowl being our response to a situation, and the bowl is knocked sideways the water will find it's own level. If we try to fix that level at any given moment then we cause problems. The same is true of our inclination to trust. Whether trust naturally flows out to others or stays closer to home, it is still trust. Just let it 'be' within the enclosure of the sitting place and it will take care of itself.

Judgemental thoughts can easily arise when we feel we have been wronged. I think we judge when we see something that calls for a response, but do not know what to do, so we make a judgement and then persuade ourselves that we have responded, we have done *something*, even if it is the wrong thing. From my experience these thoughts stem from painful memories stored up within us that have not yet been fully resolved.

Inflexible opinions and judgements are confrontational as we use them to impose our own interpretation upon a situation. They become like a wedge between ourselves and what is going on within and around us, this creates tension and it prevents us from seeing the whole picture. Having seen 'only a part of the elephant' we are convinced our opinion is right and this deepens the sense of conflict. It also takes us farther away from seeing into the heart of the matter because the hardness and rigidity of our insistence blocks the flow of the incoming Buddha and the broader eye it brings. If we keep relinquishing, or releasing all our fear, opinions and assessments into the flow of the breath, breathing them *out*, letting them be carried away, then we can breathe *in* the incoming Buddha which brings an alternative way of seeing.

The broader eye of the refuge has its root in the hara,<sup>2</sup> the womb of the Tathagata, and it sees beyond the surface appearance of suffering. It sees with love, it sees the true wish behind the confused actions of all concerned: I am you and you are me, what will help here and what will hinder, the gaze is tender not hard or accusatory, it draws the situation or feelings into its heart and is free of any condemnation. I have had the good fortune to be looked at in this way and I know it feels like a blessing for which I have been so grateful.

The practice will enable us to view ourselves and others in this way, calling forth a quiet sense of well being. Rather than the mental whirlpool and emotional heat of who did what to whom we can gather ourselves within the enclosure of the sitting place and are able to settle down to reflect deeply upon what happened and how to respond in an enlightened way.

There can also be a fear that perhaps we have got it all wrong and a sadness, or even a sense of shame, that surely we cannot be 'real' trainees if we feel so shaken or vulnerable. Nothing could be further from the truth. What we call shame here is a sign that we are ripe for change. Questioning our perception of our self and the wisdom of our thoughts or actions usually means we are ready for a deeper letting go and within that vulnerability is an openness that becomes a receptacle for life changing insight. The Tibetan master Milarepa used the phrase, "the warming breath of angels" and I feel that at these times the universe views us with kind and caring eyes, tenderness and sympathy flow out toward us together with a wish to help. Buddha recognises Buddha and sees only that which is Its own. When all is revealed within the heart there will be no accusations or condemnations, it is as though the great enabler will gently say, come, put your hand in mine, I have been waiting for you and we will walk on together. Reconnecting with our own true essence calms us, somehow we no longer feel alone and the act of yielding, of accepting that hand is the compassionate step that makes all the other steps possible and the first of those steps is to 'just be' with whatever situation we find ourselves in. This very situation is our training ground of the moment, this is what life has brought to us and it is enough, it lacks for nothing and neither do we. The way forward is nowhere other than right here, right now.

Above all do not worry if you think you have lost your faith because faith has nothing to do with hope, belief or concepts, it is neither a feeling nor is it an object. It cannot be lost or dented. How *we perceive faith*, or perceive our ability to 'have' faith may change, but that is different to *It changing*. Faith is the intuitive knowing of that which we are, it is an eternal constant within all beings, expressed by the Eternal Light that shines upon our altars. It is why every being who sets out on this wondrous journey of discovery has the potential to fulfil their wish and find that, within every single thing that comes to us in this life, lies the next step of our pilgrimage. It may not be easy, it may ask much of us and we may wobble at times, but it is possible.

There is an expression 'blind faith.' It is another reassurance that, even though we are temporarily 'blind' to it, having no conscious sense of it, faith is eternally present because something in us always knows where it is going, is never blind and always turns towards the light. When we are stunned by the distress of our situation this inner knowing will, if we let it, hold, sustain and carry us whilst we process what has happened to us and get stronger. A

big part of training is stepping out into an unknown space and allowing ourselves to patiently abide there, without needing an immediate understanding or the comfort of consciously knowing what lays ahead.

If we think our faith has been damaged we may also doubt our ability to meditate. When physically ill, stunned or shaken by an event, we may not be able to cope, either mentally or physically, with sitting in formal seated meditation. This has happened to me and I can say, for sure, that it is no obstacle. Meditation is vast and kaleidoscopic, in our fear and folly we can be too quick to try and define it, to make it less than it is so that it fits our present fearful mind set. All this does is create imagined limitations where there are none. The great enabler of the Buddhist way embodies generosity of spirit. There is nothing mean or harsh about it, it is not set up to eliminate us at every hurdle or discount us because we are in a fragile or distressed state. It is as a soft wind from the West that gently carries everyone forwards.

There is no need to fear if your mind is reeling or you are in shock, just accept how it is and lean into it rather than pulling away. We need to connect with our suffering, this connection is the opening that enables help to flow in. For this connection to be made all we have to do is not turn away. If you can, welcome the distress and relax into the midst of it as you would rest at ease on a comfortable bed. Give yourself to it. Whilst you do this the refuge will support your mind, reassuring it, (by constantly flowing through it), that it does not have to resolve or sort out anything, all it has to do is be a pipe, open to whatever arises and let all those thoughts, theories, feelings and emotions flow through in an unhindered way. We can do this in a relaxed setting like sitting in a favourite armchair or whilst strolling in the garden. Imagine the breath gently coming up the back on the in breath, which will draw in the stress and help your mind to come to terms with the situation then, on the exhalation, think of the breath flowing down your front into the hara and keep giving, or releasing yourself and the distress into that breath. The intent is not to get rid of it but to enable its reasons for existing to fall away, and this will happen naturally in time. In The Litany of The Great Compassionate One it says, “do do the work within my heart”, and it is here, within the mystery of our internal sitting place, that the digesting, resolving and healing will begin to take place.

On those difficult days when it all seems too much or that progress is slow we sense that faith and patience are two strands of one thread and that quietly going through our day, without expectation, just dealing with the task

at hand, is as much a part of the 'going on' as are the times of obvious movement. These are days when faith deepens and much is happening beneath the surface of our awareness that we may not yet be aware of.

As we steadily keep going, doing the best we can, a pattern of 'one calls and one answers' begins to emerge. Instead of looking outwards and being preoccupied by the issue and feelings that have troubled us our awareness is drawn within, to the light; to the constant within the changes. With this turning we offer our battered senses to the inner flow of our eternal essence and are grateful for how tender it is, and for how complete we are, even whilst distressed. This calms us and our ability to relax and trust the meditation drops a notch deeper.

Soon little opportunities to train in a different, perhaps less self conscious way, begin to reveal themselves. They come unexpectedly, like suddenly finding wild flowers in a grassy meadow and are as natural to us as is breathing. Step by step a pillar of inner stability begins to grow, although there are still many questions and perhaps some mood swings, we know that we can meditate and that we are going to be all right.

Having felt utterly lost our mind clearly acknowledges that it does not know what to do, which we now recognise as a blessing. Because we have been shaken deeply by life we are raw. Our openness and fragility mean that there is no opposition to the light of Truth as it flows through us, infusing our senses and a process of transformation begins to unfold that will lead us to a better quality of life and a deeper understanding of ourselves and of life in the human realm than we had before the event that shook us so deeply took place.

Everyone has a basic natural instinct to protect themselves from mental and physical injury. The question is, how do we do that in the right way? We can pull down the drawbridge, harden ourselves against others and live in an isolated fearful or angry way, ever wary of people, or we can choose a different path. It is said that the only weapon a monk may carry is the Truth. Buddhism offers us the chance to walk the path of understanding by enabling a broader vision to unfold. True insight is a great liberator, a powerful weapon and a protector because that broader eye sees into the complexity of our existence.

There could be many reasons why we find ourselves in a painful situation. Maybe old karma (cause and effect), is working itself out. Perhaps life is offering us an intimate valuable lesson, something that we must face, understand and resolve in this life time; an opportunity not to make the same mistaken choices that we did in the past. Inner reflection and the awareness

it brings can reveal specific insights that help us to understand conditions that have gone into making us the being we are and what each situation we find ourselves in asks of us. It is this insight which prevents us from seeing ourselves as victims of circumstance.

Buddhist teaching tells us that suffering exists, we bring much distress our way when we cannot accept this. The broader eye sees what can be changed and what cannot, the wisdom of this understanding lays to rest much frustration and pointless striving. It enables our interaction with life to deepen our understanding of it rather than immobilise us.

Sometimes things get confused and one of us acts in ways that harm others, leaving them feeling hurt or betrayed. All the actions and reactions that arise in self and other are within the flowing of our universal essence no matter how great the confusion or how terrible the actions nothing is ever outside of that flowing. All beings are doing their best to resolve their karma, to prosper and fulfil their lives, all will reap the consequences of their actions. When we sense that those consequences may be deeply painful it enables us to have sympathy rather than condemnation for others. There but for the grace of God go I.

When we let the inner gaze of contemplative reflection rest upon and digest that which we find hard to bear it is transformed from being something that entraps us to becoming the vehicle that takes us deeper into the heart of training. A situation has called forth something with a need to be resolved and the training has given us the means to meet that need. It may take a lot of time and patience, it may ask much of us, but it can be done. No matter how painful or wonderful our thoughts and feelings may be, no matter what situations life brings to us, if we entrust them to the Great Enabler of training we see that they all pass, and in their passing they become the Dharma of our existence.

#### *Notes*

1. Quotation from *The Scripture on the Immeasurable Life of the Tathagata* (trans. Rev. Hubert Nearman), *The Monastic Office* (Mt Shasta, Shasta Abbey Press) p. 134.
2. Hara: the internal meditation hall, situated in the lower abdomen.