

Life's Difficulties

Alan Zundel at the HeartAwake Center, June 20th 2007

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Well, as often happens, I came up with an idea for a talk—the germ of the idea came to me after our discussion last week, and over the week bits and pieces would come to me until a few hours ago it was pretty nicely mapped out in my mind what I wanted to say.

And then, as often happens, about an hour ago I got a totally different idea [*laughs*] of what I wanted to talk about, and decided that second one is really what I'm going to talk about. All right, so—no big surprise—the talk may meander a little bit and I may not go neatly from point A to point B to point C, or I might surprise myself and it may hang together very well; I don't know.

What I am going to talk about, is handling the difficulties of life. The reason this comes up—two things, really. You all know my daughter is not well. And she has been doing worse lately. And we were talking about that at dinner today; it's a real challenge for her. And my parents are not doing well either. My mother has dementia and my father is the primary caretaker; she's getting worse, he's under a lot of stress, so my siblings decided to have a family meeting to decide what, if anything, they would do about the situation. So it brought up this whole question of how do we deal with the difficulties of life. And I think that's something well worth talking about.

From time to time people have asked me, when I give talks like this here or when I did it previously in California, asked me about—in one way or another—positive thinking, and how much there is to that, how much you can change the circumstances of your life by changing the way you think.

[*Voice:*] That's a big topic.

It *is* a big topic. I don't know why people ask *me* that, because if you're interested in the idea of achieving health and wealth, I'm not particularly wealthy and I'm not all completely healthy either [*laughs*]. So I'm not the one to talk to if you're looking for someone that can do that. And if you are attempting to maintain a positive attitude with the understanding that any kind of a negative thinking or a lack of belief will undermine your efforts to achieve that kind of a life, then you don't want to listen to what I'm going to say, because I'm going to—I'm skeptical of that.

But that throws you into one of these black and white issues, where our minds usually want to go 'it has to be this or it has to be that.' And it's not. It never is. It's, as Len would say, what?

[*Voice:*] A paradox.

It's a paradox! [*General laughter*] People want to have it either that you can by altering the way you think and behave control the situations of your life, *or* you have no control and therefore the best you can do is learn to deal with it gracefully. That seems to be the alternatives, but my perspective is that it's neither. Or maybe it's both; there's a little truth in both sides.

We can have some influence over the things that happen in our life, but we can't completely control what happens in our life. So there's something to be said for learning to deal with the situations that come up gracefully, but there's also something to be said for changing our ways of thinking, and beyond that, waking up to the way our mind works so that we can cease to *contribute* to our problems [*laughs*].

Because these are the two things that I think are achievable: number one, you can face difficulties—face isn't even the word I'd use, because that seems to already imply the only thing you can do is deal with it gracefully, when I think you *can* do something about it—so handle, handle difficulties with inner strength. There's a difference between handling situations that are difficult badly, and handling them from an inner strength that allows you to get through them, or allows you to deal with them, more—the world 'successfully' implies that maybe you can overcome them; sometimes you can, sometimes you can't—but there's an inner strength that allows you to deal with them without making them worse, without adding to your pain through mental suffering, and for the people around you who are in difficulties, allows you to contribute a little of that strength to them so that they can draw from you.

[*Voice:*] 'Effective' is the word I was thinking of.

Maybe effective. Deal with them effectively. Now here's going to be my problem all along, I'm going to lose the train of my thought very easily—

[*Voice:*] Uh-oh. I won't say anything.

It's all right [*laughs*]; it'll happen whether you say something or not. So, the two things we can hope for, in the way that I'm presenting to you, are handling difficult situations more effectively, and not contributing to making them worse. Because I do think we control some situations in our life by making our own difficulties. A lot of them. We make our own difficulties, and that can be solved. A lot of difficulties we don't make; life is filled with sickness, unexpected financial reversals, injuries, accidents, difficult relationships—some of which we have limited control over, some of which we have more control over, some of which we can alter entirely. So it's not a black and white situation in my book.

Negative thinking—being down on yourself and expecting the worst to happen—can make things worse. So, as an alternative, positive thinking is better; to some extent I'd say positive thinking is a good thing and something worthy of pursuing. There's two problems with positive thinking, though—well, maybe three problems when you come down to it.

One is that it can be exaggerated. Because positive thinking can make a difference in our life, people want to extend this to the point of saying that we can achieve all of our dreams,

everything we would desire, simply through positive thinking, which I don't believe is true. Of course, that sounds like negative thinking, doesn't it? So they don't want to listen to *me*. But I *am* saying positive thinking can make a difference. One of the problems though is that it can't completely eliminate from our lives everything bad that's going to happen.

You look back in history—there's no way to either prove or disprove these ideas about positive thinking completely changing your life. One of the things I was going to say, though, is that if you look back in history these ideas have been around for a long time, and every proponent of these ideas in the past, without exception, has died so far. [*laughs*] So one thing's for certain—you're going to die. I don't want to make—well, maybe not, you know, maybe Jesus will return and those of us who are here will be raptured away—I don't know; it's possible. I don't want to make anything absolute.

But bad things can happen to you. In my book, positive thinking can make a difference but bad things can still happen. So that's one of the problems: if you take it too far you're going to be disappointed when something bad happens, and not only are you going to have that philosophy of life which maybe had been giving your life meaning shattered and you'll feel this sense of emptiness, but it'll also sometimes cause people to blame themselves for things that they really had no control over. You know, 'If only I had been more positive, I wouldn't have gotten sick,' or 'If only I had believed harder, I wouldn't have lost my money because my business failed' or something like this. Sometimes there's just nothing you could have done differently to avoid a difficult situation, and getting down on yourself is not helping.

So when you believe *too* strongly there's always that opposite reaction—you know, when you try to push too hard in this way it'll rebound the other way with equal force. It's like a rubber band, you stretch it this way and then when you leave go it's going to zoom out further in the other direction, right? So, that's the second problem with positive thinking. One was that not everything can be overcome by positive thinking, the other is it sometimes causes people to get down on themselves when they shouldn't.

And the third is that, even though positive thinking and changing your behavior can alter your life for the better in a lot of ways, oftentimes there are subconscious things going on in our minds that are contributing to our creating problems, that on the superficial level of changing your thoughts that you're conscious of is not going to get to. And even repeating those thoughts over and over and over, I don't think can overcome if there was in your past some kind of deeply ingrained pattern or trauma or situation that gave you this emotional blockage. You won't overcome it simply by positive thinking; it has to be brought to conscious awareness and accepted to be resolved, but you won't accept it if you think that it's negative thinking.

In other words, if you've got something like that at an emotional deep level and you try to overcome it by simply inducing positive thoughts and reinforcing positive thoughts, not only will it not overcome it, but it will prevent the healing of it because every time it rises up for acknowledgement and integration into your life you'll be trying to beat it back down as negative thinking. And it'll leave you in a position of fighting against yourself.

So these are some of my objections to positive thinking. I think there's a lot of value in it, but taken too far there's a lot of problems with it as well.

So—the positive thing about positive thinking is that, if your negative thinking is not deeply engrained or based on some emotional issue that has to be acknowledged, it's simply a matter of retraining your mind so that you're not undercutting yourself. And that's a good thing. They've done studies, and people who promote positive thinking will have lots of them like this, that thinking about succeeding at something can often be as helpful as actually practicing. Like shooting baskets, right? If you sit there and imagine yourself successfully throwing a ball into the basket, your ability to do that is improved almost as much as if you stood there throwing it in the basket over and over. So it can have an effect.

And areas of our life where negative thinking particularly can contribute are bad money decisions—when we don't believe in ourselves, when we're afraid to take any kind of a chance on pursuing things that we could have achieved—relationships—when we're expecting bad things from other people, we help to create that situation because people pick up from us negative thoughts, even on a subtle level. Often it's very obvious you have this negative thinking about other people and you expect them to let you down or do something bad to you or something like this, and if it's overt people are not going to like it and they're going to treat you badly or they're going to avoid you. But even if it's not overt people can pick up if that's going on inside your mind on a very subtle level, and it can affect how people treat you.

So in that sense you're creating your own problems, right? Creating your own problems in a financial sense if you make bad decisions because your thinking about money is skewed in a negative direction, and you create interpersonal problems with people if your thinking about people is skewed in a negative direction. So recognizing those kind of negative patterns and then trying to replace them with more positive thoughts can be a helpful thing, as long as you don't expect to solve everything. So, as you catch yourself, or as you become aware that you tend to see things negatively, then you try to replace it with positive thoughts: 'I am a capable person,' 'I am capable of growing.'

Here's the difference in the positive thoughts that I would recommend and what is sometimes recommended: sometimes people recommend positive thoughts along the line of 'I can achieve anything I desire,' 'Everything is within my control,' that kind of thing. I recommend something a little more modest. Maybe you can think of this as a stepping stone if you want to go on to the bigger things [*laughs*] that are not stuff that I believe in, but at a modest level, simply say, 'I have the capacity to grow,' 'I have the capacity to change,' 'I have the capacity to handle things better than I have in the past,' 'I have the capacity to do better,' 'I have the capacity to treat people more gently, to trust people, to handle money more wisely.' Those kind of things, without making it into a big scale, you know, you're going to become rich and famous. You can simply have positive thinking that overcomes more negative types of thinking, and that's a good thing to do; it's not a bad thing.

But waking up is what I talk about consistently; not reprogramming your mind, but getting outside the mind. Recognizing the mind is only part of who you are. Seeing the mind for what it is and being something *other*; resting in a sense of yourself that's much larger than this

mind that has thoughts, that has expectations. That's what I've talked about week after week after week.

You're already waking up a little bit when you become aware of your own negative thinking, so all these techniques of meditation and self-examination are oriented towards making you aware of your mind. That's what you do when you meditate, right? If you're not simply zoning out and being half asleep, you're paying attention to how your mind is working and you'll see patterns in your mind. If they're negative patterns, you'll see the negative patterns and you'll start to recognize that and say, 'Maybe I need to do something about that.' And in your day-to-day life when you're not meditating, when you're actually interacting with the world around you, you'll become more prone to see those patterns in your mind influencing your behavior as they're happening, and you can catch yourself and try to redirect it.

So all these techniques for becoming more conscious of your mind, for waking up, are also techniques that can help you recognize negative patterns, and try to push them in a more positive direction.

Positive thinking, though, is not the same thing as waking up. I think I said something about this a couple weeks ago. If you're waking up to your negative thinking and you simply replace it with positive thinking and then go back to sleep with positive thoughts, you're still acting mechanically. You're still living in the realm of mind and not drawing from this deeper sense of wisdom and compassion and consciousness.

One of the hallmarks of awakesness is living in the present moment, living in the present moment. The mind—the small mind—whether it thinks positively or negatively, has a very difficult time living in the present mo—present moment. 'The president moment' [*laughs*], what is that? The small mind, the positive thinkings, the negative thinking, whatever it is—these thoughts running through awareness—has a difficult time staying in the present moment. It always wants to run forward to where things are heading. Either things are getting better and better, and I'm going to get healthier and wealthier, whatever, or things are going to get worse, 'I'm going to screw up,' 'I'm going to get sick,'—it's catastrophizing, right?

Either way, it's taking you away from the ability to remain in the present and draw from this inner strength. This inner strength can—what? It's compromised by being led out of the present moment. Your mind draws upon energy, energy inside yourself, and takes it into the future and saps energy that could be devoted towards handling the situations you're dealing with right *now* in an effective manner: being present to the people who need your help, who need your strength; being present to the situation that demands your response, whatever it is. In very concrete terms, say you're dealing with an injury or an illness, if your mind is running on about everything you need to do to get better or how this is going to get worse or what are you doing to do if it continues to get worse, you're taking energy away from just dealing with whatever it is you need to do right now.

There's nothing wrong with thinking about what's going to happen in the next few days and making plans, but if your mind gets caught up in that and trapped in that, and energy is being devoted to that without any sense of purpose, without using your capacity to envision the future

to make a plan that you can actually start to act on right now, it's wasted energy. And it's energy that could be devoted to spontaneously recognizing what could be done now, or planning for something that could be done now and acting upon it with more presence, with more—I can't come up with a better word, but I think you get the flavor of what I'm saying.

If the mind's not running into the future it's sometimes running into the past. 'What did I do to make this situation bad,' or 'How did I contribute to this,' or beating up on yourself and feeling guilty about things, and 'What could I have done differently?'—it's the same thing. If you're not using your capacity to review the past and think of things that maybe will be helpful for you to change now, or deal with now, you're simply wasting energy. When your mind gets trapped in these patterns and it can't break free of them, it's just wasting energy, beating up on yourself or reviewing things that can no longer be changed, that you can't do anything about, you're taking away from your capacity to be fully present and deal with the situation that's before you.

So coming more and more into this awakeness means recognizing the patterns of your mind, perhaps using your moments of awakeness to redirect them in more positive directions, but then also continuing to move forward into greater awakeness so that you can even go beyond positive thinking to simply being present now. To being more awake now. To seeing the mind working now and saying, you know, 'I'm not going to be drawn into that, I'm just going to let it do its thing; I'm going to reserve my energy for being present and acting when I really need to act.'

Concluding thought, I think—I hope. [*laughs*] I hope this ties it up. Concluding thought would be, only in this awakeness and this ability to be present now, this willingness to move back from thought, the realm of thought and putting all your energy into thought patterns, moving into this awakeness, moving into this presence—only through that can you allow these deeper patterns to come to the surface and be resolved. Whatever they might be in you: there might not be much of anything, there may be stuff that's buried so deep you're hardly aware of it, there may be stuff that keeps bobbing to the surface and you keep trying to push it back down. But whatever it is, only the trust that dealing with *right now*, whatever comes up I can handle it, allows that kind of stuff—because it can be very painful and confusing—allows that stuff to come up, show its face, become accepted for what it is, and then to be able to move forward. It resolves that. Only in the awakeness can those deeper patterns, those deeper emotional issues, be resolved. It can't be resolved by positive thinking.

So—I was going to tell you the story of the golden cave, but I'll have to save that for another evening.

[*Voice:*] Can you summarize it for us, the golden cave?

Yes, but I'm not going to. [*general laughter*]

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