

# 1. STRESS AND ITS ELIMINATION

Understanding and removing stress

*“I teach one thing and one only: stress and the end of stress.”*  
- Buddha

## THE NATURE OF STRESS

Mental stress results from wanting reality to be different from what it is.

It is self-evident that you prefer to be calm and avoid stress. In order to achieve this, it is enough for you to fully realize three things:

**What happens, happens;** nothing else happens.

**Reality, what actually happens,** cannot possibly be different from what it is.

**All apparent alternatives to what is happening** are imagined, thoughts only.

Common examples of thoughts that cause stress are wishing you were younger or healthier or had more money. So are wishing you had not failed a test or did not get into your car only to find you have a flat tire.

Throughout life you may experience or suffer various expressions of stress including anger, anxiety, disappointment, discontent, dissatisfaction, dread, envy, fear, frustration, guilt, humiliation, impatience, insult, misery, mistrust, regret, tension and worry.

Stress seems to be an inescapable part of life. It causes trouble both for you and people around you. So what causes stress and how can you stop it?

## HOW STRESS IS CREATED

In order to see how stress is created, you need to understand three things:

- the way you think about things;
- the way things really are;
- the results of confusing these.

## THE WAY YOU THINK ABOUT THINGS

The Sutralamkara<sup>2</sup> states:

- Know that nothing exists apart from the mind;
- Realize the mind itself is devoid of true reality.

As a human being you see things in terms of your opinions and concepts which appear to split the world into so-called dualistic<sup>3</sup> structures (from the Latin word duo meaning two), for example:

- Beautiful (or ugly):** there is no absolute standard and opinions vary widely. Real people and things are neither

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<sup>2</sup> Sutralamkara: major work of Buddhist philosophy.

<sup>3</sup> Dualistic: concepts, the view of things as “this” or “that.”

inherently beautiful nor ugly. A common man sees a beautiful woman as a temptation. A monk sees her as a distraction. A hungry leopard sees her as steak. In fact she is just what she is.

*Beautiful and ugly are opinions, not facts.*

**Religious (or secular):** A Buddhist, for example, does not conveniently fit into either category. Buddhism is neither a religion nor a non-religion. Some philosophers relate to Buddhism as an atheistic religion. The Dalai Lama<sup>4</sup> calls Buddhism the science of the mind.

*Religious and secular are opinions, not real.*

Your own mental structures consisting of your particular set of opinions and concepts is the result of many factors including your genetic makeup, parental upbringing, social and cultural environments and the way you have perceived, internalized and acted on your experiences. These mental structures develop and change throughout your life. The world as you see it is largely a reflection of your mental history.

Although your thoughts and structures may be of academic interest to a psychologist or neuroscientist, their main functions for you are in organizing your life and as a source of creativity. But just as you do not assume the factual correctness or incorrectness of a novel, symphony or painting, why assume that what you think is true or false? What you think is an original creation of your mind.

You are so used to talking in ideas that you rarely if ever question whether these ideas actually refer to anything real. In fact, it is impossible to think “about something.” Thoughts

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<sup>4</sup> Dalai Lama (the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, b. 1935): spiritual leader of Tibet.

occur, that is all. You do not automatically believe others' thoughts, so why blindly believe your own?

There are three ways of understanding and misunderstanding your thoughts:

**Thoughts** you see as plain thoughts, coming and going, are harmless neurological processes in and of themselves. They cause no trouble.

**Opinions**, thoughts you believe, tend to cause stress because they often appear to you to clash with reality.

**Beliefs**, opinions you hold absolutely, can cause even more trouble when you defend them with force, mistaking them for facts.

Political and religious beliefs continue to cause much conflict and war in the world.

## THE WAY THINGS REALLY ARE

Reality, the world as it is, is neither inherently split (dualistic), nor unified, neither structured nor unstructured. It just is.

This is so simple that most people do not understand it.

## THE RESULTS OF CONFUSING YOUR THOUGHTS WITH REALITY

To be real, things must exist regardless of what you think. When you think without checking whether your thoughts refer to anything real, they can lead you absolutely anywhere. There are no limits since your mind is unlimited, unlike reality which is restricted to what actually happens.

Although you can plan now for an imagined desired future, you cannot change what is happening now because it is already happening. You can also not change the future because the future is expectations, imagined and non-existent.

Confusing thoughts with reality creates stress by tempting you to believe in alternative illusory realities, to want things different from what they are, and to fail to understand why this is not working for you. The resulting problems and conflicts can give rise to stress. For example:

**Your plans may fail.** Since your emotions, and so your actions, stem from what you think is happening, but you necessarily act in the real world, the results of your actions may be very different from what you planned.

**The world may appear to be “broken.”** As long as you identify with your opinions, you naïvely judge the world as right or wrong according to how well it matches your opinions and expectations, rather than more sensibly judging the validity of your opinions and expectations by how well they match events. Reality always wins!

**People may respond negatively** to your behavior when it is inappropriate to what is happening. This can negatively impact your relationships, particularly close ones.

Remember that everything in this guide is **my** opinion, so be careful neither to accept nor reject any of it. Check out everything very carefully for yourself. But remember that your own conclusions are also thoughts, even while they continue to influence your behavior.

This is also an opinion.

So is this...

## ENDING STRESS

Although things change all the time, there is no need, or indeed possibility, for you to change anything, merely to grasp deeply how things really work. If you consider carefully, it becomes clear that the past has gone, is unalterable, the future is non-existent except as your present expectations, and “now” is already here with you.

You then realize that change is no more than a philosophical idea. Without your memory (also a mental process) it is impossible to even think of change. Within this realization, true rest occurs naturally even during intense activity. This is non-meditation, natural meditation or “resting in natural awareness” as Longchen Rabjam<sup>5</sup> put it.

By recognizing the nature of reality you are able to live, love and benefit yourself and others more easily, as you no longer experience the frustration of trying to grasp at imagined parts of your experience or trying to remove them.

## DISSOLVING THE ILLUSION

It is not easy to grasp that the same thoughts that comprise your knowledge and enable you to function in society do not actually refer to anything real, even though they may work reasonably well quite a lot of the time. But the skill to know the difference is essential for your peace of mind.

Art students are taught this skill when learning how to draw and paint. Art teachers instruct students to draw what their

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<sup>5</sup> Longchen Rabjam (also Longchenpa, 1308–1364): Dzogchen master and major teacher of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism.

eyes see, not what they think is there. They constantly remind students not to draw and paint from a memory of “what a banana looks like” but rather to observe the specific banana in the still-life fruit arrangement in front of them.

As you increasingly understand that your thoughts do not refer to reality:

**You become calmer** regardless of how things work out.

**You respect your thoughts** that create your imagined world, but as thoughts only.

**Things cease to surprise or upset you.** You just deal with things as best you can as they happen.

**Past childhood and adult difficulties, abuse and trauma cause you less trouble,** as they increasingly appear as painful memories rather than reality.

**Your mind becomes less capable of creating conflict and stress.** The real world as it is can never be in conflict with anything else because there is nothing else with which it can be in conflict.

**You become more responsible.** Your emotional responses and actions become increasingly relevant to what is happening. Your self-confidence grows. People trust you more. Your relationships are easier and more mutually beneficial. These are powerful sources of wellbeing.

**There is an absence of that familiar feeling that something is wrong.**

Life becomes easier and more comfortable.

Dissolving your illusion—seeing yourself and the world more realistically—ultimately involves nothing more than resting in natural awareness. Two supporting activities can be useful

while this state is repeatedly introduced to you and gradually becomes familiar, ultimately your second nature:

**Study:** explanations and conversations with teachers and like-minded friends that help you clarify what is real and, more importantly, what is not.

**Meditation:** experiential activities designed to calm your mind and help you discover the true nature of both yourself and the world.

## STUDY

Ultimately, it is enough to appreciate deeply that what happens, happens and that nothing else ever happens.

This sounds so trivial that it may seem there is really nothing to learn. But to fully appreciate this simple fact may take considerable time, effort and resources. There are many ways to misunderstand it. Although not complex, it is both subtle and elusive.

Are the study and practice actually essential or redundant? Nagarjuna,<sup>6</sup> the first century founder of the Mahayana Buddhism<sup>7</sup> tradition, might have said, “They are neither essential nor non-essential, nor both, nor neither.” This work is peppered with apparent paradoxes that melt away as you examine them more closely.

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<sup>6</sup> Nagarjuna (c. 150–250): major Buddhist teacher and philosopher, founded the Madhyamaka school of Mahayana Buddhism together with his student Aryadeva.

<sup>7</sup> Mahayana Buddhism: one of the two main existing branches of Buddhism, the other being Theravada.

## MEDITATION

Meditation is being awake, aware of what is actually happening. When the Buddha was asked, following his enlightenment, “Are you a god or a man?” he answered, “I am awake.”

When you are fully awake, you discover your unconditioned mental space, in which problems cannot exist.

There is a simple meditation at the end of each chapter and a graded meditation path in a separate section at the end of the guide.

## THE FOUR ESSENTIAL PROCESSES

Release from stress happens through four processes, although not necessarily in this order:

**You are introduced to your real nature** and the nature of the world, which ultimately turn out to be the same. This usually requires a teacher. The introduction may be required many times, as you will regularly forget.

**You clearly recognize** and identify your true nature and the nature of the world when they are pointed out to you.

**You become familiar** with this state of recognition; this is usually achieved by meditation.

**You recognize the truth** of this insight in everyday life, until every event becomes more fuel for the process, which naturally develops and stabilizes.

This summary is not essentially different from the three essential points of Garab Dorje:<sup>8</sup>

You are introduced to the nature of mind.

You grasp this with total conviction.

You proceed confidently to the result.

## PARADOXES ON THE WAY

The only thing to learn is that there is nothing to learn

The aim of meditation is to discover that meditation is superfluous

There are surprises on the way. The more you observe reality, the more things you thought were real turn out to be thoughts. There is no need for you to make an effort to be different from what you are now or even to try to stop making this effort. This is because it is impossible. You change all the time anyway, both mentally and physically, but although you are changing, that does not necessarily mean there is anybody doing the changing.

Although you may say “I will change myself,” on closer examination it is unclear what this “I” refers to in any tangible sense. It is similar to watching rain fall without needing to invent someone who is actually moving the rain down. The rain is a natural consequence of atmospheric conditions. Similarly, you change constantly as the result of the dynamic nature of your body and mind and the influence of your surroundings on you.

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<sup>8</sup> Garab Dorje (c. 55 C.E.): the semi-historical first human teacher of Dzogchen, the Tibetan Great Perfection teachings.

Some people may say that God causes it all, however, since most theistic religions emphasize that God is ineffable and has no attributes, this statement is recognized by those religions as actually meaningless at deeper levels of religious and spiritual understanding.

## MEDITATION

*Sit quietly in a comfortable place.*

*Listen to the sounds*

*Notice your thoughts which identify individual sounds as cars, people and other things.*

*The sounds come and go.*

*The thoughts come and go.*

*Listen to the sounds and observe the thoughts.*

*You are the witness.*

*There is nothing special for you to do.*

*This is meditation, resting in natural awareness, awake.*