

Twenty Points for Dealing with Overwhelm

We are living in what the old Chinese curse would call ‘interesting times’. Climate change, species extinction, terrorism, the refugee crisis, drought, flood, famine, populist movements, radical changes to the established world order – make your own list. For Buddhists, hiding our heads in the sand and ignoring it all isn’t really an option. Our basic stance is surely that we are practising the Dharma to help ourselves and benefit the world.

Let’s begin by acknowledging that it’s wonderful that we care, that we are concerned about problems like the refugee crisis, warfare, climate change, and so on. We do have good hearts, and we want to respond to these situations. However, sadly we can sometimes end up feeling paralysed by them, and unable to respond effectively.

Why is this? It seems to me that much of our society suffers from a kind of deadly duo of low self-esteem in relation to ourselves, and horrified anxiety in relation to what is happening in the world. That’s a very unfortunate combination. It easily leads us to feel powerless, for what could *someone like me* ever do about *all this*? The everyday manifestation of this is often a feeling of being overwhelmed.

This tendency to overwhelm seems so common these days, even among Buddhist practitioners, that I’d like to offer you some suggestions for dealing with it. So here is a list of 20 points that can help to avoid overwhelm and deal with it when it does arise. All of them have helped me, over the years, to stay open and of help in situations where I would otherwise have found it all too much.

Having 20 suggestions to wade through may feel a bit overwhelming in itself! I’ll touch on them relatively briefly, and you can always just skim the headings and pick out one or two to read that sound promising. Here goes:

1. Be aware of how much you take in of what is disturbing. These days the news media are constantly offering us opportunities to watch disturbing images. That is hard enough, but often these images are served up by reporters who present the situation in a way that encourages us to feel anxious and wound up. After all, the aim of a news bulletin isn’t just to pass on information in a cool objective way. That news outlet has to survive, and to do so it needs viewers, listeners, readers. So there is always a hook – an attempt to grab and hold our attention, which means grabbing and holding us emotionally. How much of all this is it really helpful for us to expose ourselves to? Do we need to take in these images with their emotive commentary directly? Do we need to watch them every few hours or every day?

‘Here we are in the refugee camp and this child...’ If we really can’t imagine what that situation must be like, then being directly shown pictures may be helpful to some extent. But if we can, does it really help us to keep on taking in images like that? Our minds, our hearts, have to digest and assimilate all this – both the underlying facts and the attempt to draw us in with the ongoing soap opera presentation to keep us hooked. So, if we need to follow the news, we could consider finding ‘cooler’, more indirect ways of learning about what is going on, which have less visceral impact and are easier to absorb.

2. Do whatever you need to help you stay resourced and balanced. Often difficult issues, whether tragic world events or upsets in our own Buddhist community, are so compelling that we become completely sucked in by them. We spend a lot of time watching, listening or reading about them, thinking about them, and discussing them. As a

result, we can lose energy, perspective, and sometimes sleep, along with any kind of mental buoyancy and resourcefulness.

If we're to stay effective, we need to keep the initiative, not becoming completely taken over. We need to give ourselves time for other things: to replenish our energy, to give our brain a rest, to regain perspective by seeing there is more to life than the current issue. If we keep the initiative and keep ourselves resourced in this way, then we can be part of the solution. If not, we get worn down and become one more part of the problem.

Compassion fatigue isn't inevitable. Those who are further down the path than we are don't suffer from it. But, until that is the case for us, we need to keep our lives balanced. We need to take time out from focusing on what is difficult. We need to practice sustainable compassionate activity.

3. Be mindful on social media. In social media discussions we often only have words on a screen to give us a sense of the people we're communicating with, and the debate usually moves very fast. There is rarely time for considered responses; the whole situation encourages shooting from the hip. When we shoot from the hip, it's easy to miss the view we disagree with and wound the person who holds it. Without a sense of the full humanity of another person with whom we may disagree, debate on social media can easily become just a way for those holding opposing views to sharpen their own arguments rather than looking for any common ground. These tetchy rapid-fire exchanges often become overwhelming, as more people join the fray.

In the current state of the world, to be of help and benefit we need to enter empathetic communication with one another, and to reflect and feel deeply. That requires as much direct communication as possible: preferably face-to-face, failing that skype, phone, or considered written exchanges. We need to have as full a sense of the person we're communicating with, and how they're responding, as possible.

4. Make sure you stay well grounded. In difficult and challenging times, we can aim to be like a strong tree in a high wind. On the surface, it may be blowing around, but it is so well-rooted in the earth that there is no danger of it being toppled. Keep bringing awareness to your feet, and your connection with the earth. Breathe into the lower belly, imagining it warm and relaxed. Walk, run, do Yoga, Tai Chi or Qigong. (One of the reasons for developing a stable meditation posture is that it helps you to stay grounded when gales of strong emotions surface in your practice.)

5. Look out for the near enemies of compassion. Watch out for pity, which is a feeling that can be stimulated in us by situations in which people are suffering. It can look like compassion, but actually isn't, because we're not really engaging. We may be expressing sympathy and concern, but we're holding back somewhere; our heart isn't going out to the person or situation. We're not really empathising, not managing to meet the situation with an open heart; there is often a sentimental quality to the feeling.

Also, keep on the watch for horrified anxiety: that sense of 'Oh no!' which is actually still about us and not about the situation. What we are responding to is really our feeling, our reaction, rather than that person and their suffering. Sometimes it comes from a sense that the situation calls for action on our part, but we don't know what to do, or feel inadequate to doing it.

When those feelings arise, we need to catch them and allow ourselves to experience them with kindly awareness, acknowledging that something in us isn't finding this situation easy to open to. Having done that, and resourced ourselves in whatever way we can, we then do our best to give our awareness more fully to the actual suffering, as much as possible allowing ourselves to empathise.

6. Watch out for irrational guilt. Contact with suffering can often provoke feelings of guilt that aren't justified. It's 'irrational' because we've done nothing wrong. For instance, we may think something like: 'How can I allow myself to be happy, when there is so much suffering in the world?' But, as mentioned earlier, there is no point in being part of the problem, we aim to be part of the solution. As it says in the *Dhammapada: Happy indeed we live among those who hate/ Among those who hate we live free from hatred*. Of course, we don't want to flaunt our happiness when we're around people who are struggling. But we don't have to make ourselves miserable in a guilty response to the suffering around us. It doesn't help us, or anyone else. If you're in a lifeboat trying to rescue people from a sinking vessel, you don't help by making a hole in the lifeboat as a display of fellow feeling...

7. Hold in your heart the wish for suffering to come to an end. Often when we are confronted with a situation of suffering and our heart opens, we immediately start to think 'What on earth can I do about it? I don't know what to do'. That undercuts the whole thing. We move from compassion straight into worry and feelings of powerlessness. Unless it's an emergency, don't immediately rush to work out what you can do to help. First, really allow yourself to feel that deep heart response, that longing for the suffering to be healed or transformed.

We need to learn to stay with that heart wish, to hold it in our heart, like a prayer almost, before we start wondering what we can do, trying to work it out. In that longing is deep Dharma; the seed from which bodhicitta will flower.

8. Let your heart 'break'. Sometimes when we hear about a situation of suffering, or sometimes in meditation when we really open to the suffering in the world, it feels as if our heart will break. What should we do? Despite how it feels, we should just stay with it.

What happens is, there is an overwhelming sense of love and compassion, desperately longing for things to be better. That builds to a crescendo. We may be in floods of tears. And then...that wave passes. Life goes on. All that has happened is that our heart has become more open, softer, more tender and responsive than it was before. So be prepared to let your heart open; compassion won't really break it. Everything is impermanent. Even a great wave of sadness will always transform into the next experience of our life. All we have to do is let it flow through us, not resisting its arising and not holding onto it.

9. Work in your sphere of influence. And then, once we have allowed ourselves to feel the full impact of the situation on our heart, and our heart's longing for that suffering to be relieved, we come to the point of reflecting on how to respond. In large and complex situations, it may feel as if there is almost nothing we can do directly. However, we can act in the sphere of what we can influence as a response to what is happening. Even if it seems very indirect or inadequate; we do what we can. We focus on what can be done, not on what we can't do or on what isn't good enough, which is often how we react.

We allow the difficult situation to deepen our motivation. For instance, there may not be much that I can do about war in the Middle East, but I can use my concern about it to motivate me further to teach people to meditate and develop more loving kindness and non-violence. It won't have any immediate effect in Syria, etc. but indirectly it contributes to reducing the amount of aggression and violence in the world. It also gives me some sense of empowerment, that I am an active agent on the side of what is truly beneficial.

10. Empathise with the perpetrators as well as the victims – in situations where human beings are causing the suffering. This doesn't mean agreeing with them. But it does mean recognising how they are being driven by suffering as well. In a way, what we see is just a cloud of suffering caused by nobody understanding how things are. Everyone is trying to make themselves happy; sometimes at other people's expense. From a certain limited viewpoint, there are 'good guys' and 'bad guys', people acting ethically or unethically. However, we don't just feel for the 'good guys'. When we look deeper, we see that even those causing the suffering are suffering themselves. In the final analysis, we are not justified in closing our heart to anyone. This is a lot to ask, but any step we take in that direction will help us feel a little more freedom in ourselves.

11. Work on the inner as well as the outer level. Even when there is nothing to be done on the outer level, rather than feeling powerless, we can work inwardly. We can at least send loving-kindness; if we've been introduced to the practice of *tonglen* – giving and receiving – we can use that; we can practise mantras of buddhas and bodhisattvas to evoke compassion. We can always do something inwardly, and personally I believe that these inner actions do have some beneficial effect on the outer level.

12. Entrust the situation to deeper forces. Everyday 'me' can never fix the suffering in the universe. We have to draw on deeper forces. As Shantideva puts it: *Indeed, goodness is weak, but the power of evil is always great and very dreadful. By what other goodness could evil be conquered if there were not surely the Awakening Mind?* i.e. bodhicitta. We can do our best to open to those deep forces of love and wisdom. We can invite bodhicitta to act through us. We can let the Buddha meditate. We don't try and do everything ourselves; we draw on deeper resources.

13. Check your expectations about life, in the light of the Dharma. A contributory factor to overwhelm is that we often have overly optimistic expectations of how things should turn out. On a deep level, we are right to feel that everything can turn out well – something in us resonates intuitively with how things are, our potential for freedom whispers to us of what is possible. However, on the mundane level, we can have no expectations of life at all. As the Dharma reminds us, all meeting ends in parting; all accumulation in dispersal; all life in death.

Buddhism doesn't even have any long-term expectations for itself. It is the only spiritual teaching on a global scale that prophesies its own demise, saying that there will come a day when not so much as one page of a Dharma text (or presumably any pixels on a screen), will be found anywhere. If universal impermanence is true, then eventually everything that has arisen will pass away. That includes the current world order and the Triratna Buddhist Community.

So we need to check whether our expectations of mundane life are set too high, looking at both our consciously-held views and our semi-conscious assumptions. If our emotional stance to life is to expect things to turn out well, then those naïve expectations will be

overthrown by reality. Being naïve from a Dharma point of view, not having taken on board that in this ‘Saha world’ bad things happen, we shall be quickly overwhelmed by our emotions when they do.

14. Do your best to let go of hopes and fears about outcomes. Ideally, we let the future take care of itself. We just work in the present to do whatever we reckon is going to be most helpful. That’s enough. If we can’t keep our mind in the present, then at least we can make positive pictures of the future, the result that we’d like to bring about. The main thing is to do what we can not to be caught up in hopes and fears about the future, because they take up a great deal of energy. The truth is that usually we have no idea how the future will turn out. For now, we do what we can wholeheartedly, without letting our energy be sapped by hopes and fears.

What we do now will be of some benefit. Even if things turn out badly, our little bit of kindness, our help, our generosity, will mitigate the effects of what’s going to happen. Let’s suppose that climate change is unstoppable. Nevertheless, doing what we can: to not add to the problem; to encourage others to take it seriously; to be kind, generous and supportive of one another – all that will make some difference. So, we stand together as much as possible; it’s still the right thing to do. If we’re going to go down, then we might as well go down helping.

15. Use the ‘wishing-prayer that dispels hope and fear’. Following on from the last point, in the Tibetan Mind Training (*Lojong*) tradition, they recommend that when we’re full of hopes and fears about how a situation will turn out, we make the wish that *whatever is for the best, may it happen*. This is always appropriate, and it cuts through the hopes and fears that keep the mind on a rollercoaster, constantly preoccupied with future outcomes.

16. Equanimity comes from reflecting that everyone has their own karma. This is a traditional reflection used in meditation on equanimity (*upeksha*). Of course, we don’t use this to justify not trying to help others, in a fatalistic way. Used correctly, it can help us to recognise the limits of our power to help others, and prevent us becoming over-responsible and over-reaching, which eventually lead to overwhelm and even burn-out. We recognise that we can influence people and situations, but as everything arises in dependence upon a vast network of conditions, we can never be in control. We can only offer our help, as one condition in the situation, and there is no way of telling whether it will be enough. This reflection helps us to do our best, without becoming attached to things having to turn out as we want them to.

17. Think ‘one at a time’. This applies to responding to the situations of suffering around us, but also more widely. For example, if we’re quite strongly introverted, we may easily feel overwhelmed at the prospect of being with a large number of people. Or if we’re very busy we may be overwhelmed by the number of things to do, emails to reply to, etc. In all these cases, we need to break things down.

The fact is that we live one moment at a time. We only ever have to deal with this moment. We only need to deal with the person, situation or experience in front of us. If we’re in pain and wondering how we’ll bear it if it carries on all through the night; we can break it down into coping with just this breath now. When we understand how to do ‘one thing at a time’ like this, then even the totally overwhelming project of ‘saving all living beings from suffering’, mainly comes down in practice to caring for the person we’re with now, the situation that is in front of us.

18. Use short pieces of Dharma to help anchor you. Find a short piece of Dharma, a bit of a poem, or some other short saying, that helps work against overwhelm for you. Write it out and keep it prominent, or learn it by heart and repeat it at regular intervals. A good example would be Shantideva's: *If you can do something about it, why worry? If you can't do anything about it, why worry?*

19. Being part of a community, and having spiritual friends, is crucial. Feeling isolated with a problem or issue that we find overwhelming is a recipe for deeper overwhelm. In difficult times, we need to reach out to people who will understand. However, we have to be aware of the amplifying effect that can happen when, being upset, angry or fearful ourselves, we talk with others who are in the same state. We want it to be 'a trouble shared is a trouble halved' as the old saying goes, not a trouble doubled. Let's choose who we talk to, and notice which kinds of communication help, and which just pull us further into the whirlpool of unhelpful feelings and loss of perspective.

20. The ultimate solution to overwhelm is awareness of emptiness. In the long run, we can resolve all our tendencies to overwhelm by using the Buddhist wisdom teachings. If we look into its nature, the overwhelming situation is ungraspable, like a mirage, like a dream. The 'me' that is feeling overwhelmed is unfindable. Ultimately, there is nothing to worry about. Obviously, we can use this in an unhelpful way, to repress uncomfortable feelings by the process often called 'spiritual bypassing'. However, over years of practice, this teaching should be making a deepening impact on the mind of a Dharma practitioner, giving a sense of perspective, and allowing us not to take even the most serious events too seriously. That way lies freedom from overwhelm, and eventually freedom from all suffering.

[The basis of this article was the transcript of a talk I gave at the Cambridge Buddhist Centre in 2016 called *Ferrying Across*, as part of a series on *Aspects of Going for Refuge*. I've edited it and added a few more points that have occurred to me since.]

Vessantara

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