

## Chapter 12

# Turning Troubles into Triumphs

### *Topics in this Chapter:*

- \* Finding blessings in challenges
- \* Softening suffering with spiritual awareness
- \* Growing from adversity

Difficult times are inevitable in everyone's life. Unwanted events and uncomfortable times bring with them the potential for making not-so-good choices, such as responding with extreme sadness, anxiety, or anger. During these traumatic times, choosing powerful spiritual efforts and thoughts over destructive ones is an especially good idea.

Along with seeking to create circumstances that bring greater happiness and avoid unnecessary suffering, you can also use spiritual wisdom and awareness to enjoy and benefit from all of your experiences — whether they are pleasant or unpleasant.

When troubles come up in your life, along with looking for ways to alleviate the problems, you can also seek to grow spiritually and personally by contemplating how these problems may have come to be. Sometimes things just seem to happen without any obvious cause on your part, but other times, you may be able to consider whether something you've done, either through actions or thoughts, commission or omission, may have contributed to attracting this obstacle to you. (See Chapter 15 for more on the laws of attraction and karma.)

### **Consider**

Contemplating the possible underlying causes of problems can give you the tools to avoid creating, supporting, or giving space for these problems to arise again in the future.

Along with contemplating the possible causes of your troubles, you can also look for ways to encourage positive results. Ask yourself, "What can I learn from this situation?" or, "What strengths can I gain by persevering through this obstacle?" As your self-knowledge increases through addressing and contemplating these kinds of questions, your troubles start to become triumphs.

## Seeing Troubles with a Positive Eye

Seeing life with a positive vision brings good energy and a healthy outlook to any experience. You can actually train yourself to look at everything that comes and goes from your life with the glasses of optimism. A touch of surrender and detachment also comes in handy when you're looking to stay calm and contented in times of struggles and strife. And don't forget to bring that all-important sense of humor!

### Spiritual Wisdom

*Life is like photography. You use the negative to develop.*

—Swami Beyondananda

The key to cultivating a positive vision is to trust in an ultimate universal goodness. This one shift of belief filters down through all the different areas of your life, including the way you experience and respond to problems. With trust, you can stay positive and focused on appreciating and growing from whatever blessings or challenges come before you.

Looking at trials and tribulations with a positive eye isn't meant to create more troubles or deny you happiness. Au contraire! With a positive view, even troubles can bring happiness as they inspire you to improve yourself. Sometimes challenges act as tools that can pry you loose from a smaller worldview and push you — running and screaming, if need be — into precious new realms of spiritual awareness.

Anyone who wants to accomplish something great, whether in worldly or spiritual life, must sacrifice certain immediate wishes and comforts. Whether you seek to be an Olympian athlete, an effective parent, an honors student, a successful businessperson, a great entertainer, or a divine spiritual being, any great accomplishment requires a sacrifice of time, attention, effort, and energy. Some achievements also bring discomforts, such as the muscle pain that can come while practicing and perfecting a physical sport or the lack of personal time that can come with being an involved parent. When you know that your pain is leading to a greater benefit, these challenges become easier to bear.

### Don't Forget

The road to success in any endeavor is to choose what is beneficial in the long run over what may be pleasant in the moment.

## Making positive choices

Challenges are inevitable, but you have the choice to decide how you will interpret and relate to the challenges in your life. One person may happily undergo great sacrifices and pains to achieve an important goal, while another moans and groans over the smallest bump in the road.

- The happy person is often looking with eyes of faith or is appreciating the bigger-picture long-term benefits that may come from his current discipline or time of suffering.
- The unhappy person is usually looking at pain as something bad that has come to harm him, without seeking to find any deeper meanings or potential benefits from the experience.

With spiritual understanding and awareness, you can live in greater harmony with the world around you and discover a peaceful contentment that remains with you whether times are pleasant or challenging.

Seeing troubles with a positive eye doesn't mean that you never experience suffering. Rather, even in the midst of suffering, you can simultaneously enter a place that's free from suffering — an awareness that reaches beyond the level of your body and the physical world into the realm of spirituality.

### Spiritual Wisdom

*When a true spiritual aspirant gets difficulties in life, he may feel sad for one moment, but he will definitely be happy in the next moment.*

—Swami Vivekananda

### ***Rising above suffering***

Rising above suffering doesn't mean to ignore or numb yourself from all pain, but rather to appreciate and respect every inner and outer experience that comes as part of the glorious dance of your life, whether pleasant or painful.

With a spiritual approach, when you're experiencing one pain or another, you feel the suffering, sadness, unhappiness, or other emotions that arise. However, at the same time, you're remembering spirit. You're remembering beneficial guidance. You're remembering that a new door will open to let in the sunlight of happiness once again. You sit with the pain for a short time and then come out of the darkness to walk on with hope in your heart and a trust in the divine presence that walks with you.

### Consider

When you grow spiritually to the point where you are watching your life as a divine play, then you experience all the events, lessons, challenges, and growth as part of this divine play. You are in the events of your life while also watching as what the Indian scriptures call *sakshi bhava*, or *witness consciousness*. You are in the world, but not of it, suffering yet not suffering.

Experiences of pain and suffering depend on the individual threshold of the person who is experiencing them. For one person, small inconveniences can cause more distress than major disasters do for another. I've watched an actress friend get more upset about a bad hair-tinting job than do others who are dealing with devastating tragedies.

Challenges affect you according to your understanding, beliefs, and state of mind, along with the arms of divine grace that come to carry you above the hottest sands and deserts of life.

When those inevitable difficult moments come — such as when you've lost someone or something precious to you, or if you don't achieve a goal you've been working toward, or when your mind, body, or spirit are in a state of pain or suffering — you can see such times with some objectivity. Even while taking intelligent steps to alleviate the suffering, you can remember that you are spirit having a physical experience, a child of the eternal who is currently enrolled in this “school for the soul” called life (see Chapter 4).

### Don't Forget

With a spiritual perspective, even if you have some agitations here and there, you can still be aware of the part of you that's free from agitation. T.S. Eliot called this place “the still point of the turning world.” It's the eye of the storm, the peaceful inner cave of your heart that remains positive and peaceful even in the midst of a full and eventful life. From that positive, peaceful place, you know that after every storm comes a chance to awaken into a new golden sky with colorful rainbows that will delight your heart, nourish your soul, and rouse your spirit.

## Something to talk about

A new priest came to town, and during his first confessional, an elderly woman came to confess her sins.

“Father, I have sinned. Fifty-three years ago, I committed adultery.” The woman went on to describe various details about the event.

The priest was moved to hear that after so much time, this woman was finally confessing her sin. He gave her some penance to do and left the church feeling especially buoyant and cheerful. After all, his purpose in joining the priesthood was to relieve people of their burdens and sins.

The next week, the same elderly woman came for confession. Once again, she confessed the same adultery sin from so many years ago. The priest wondered whether her advanced age had made her forget that she'd already confessed the same sin a week earlier, or maybe she was feeling so guilty about her adulterous affair that she felt a need to confess it again.

Three more Sundays came, and each week, this woman arrived to confess the same transgression of adultery from 53 years ago, always in great detail. The priest finally decided to speak up and told the woman, “You've already confessed this same sin several times, and I assure you that through the grace of Our Father, your sin has been forgiven. There is no need to keep confessing it every week.”

The woman responded, “I know, but I like to talk about it.”

Like this woman, many people enjoy talking about not only their salacious sins, but also their terrible troubles. Some people practically become tabloid shows about themselves — sharing every detail of each dramatic challenge over and over with various friends.

## Spiritual Wisdom

*The more you move towards the goal, all sorrow will cease. Even if there is sorrow, you will become impervious to it. It will not touch you. There will be an inner strength created within you where even sorrow will not have a meaning for you. You will smile even at misfortune and suffering.*

—Chidananda

## ***Finding blessings from tragedy***

### **Spiritual Wisdom**

*The struggle of life is one of our greatest blessings. It makes us patient, sensitive, and Godlike. It teaches us that although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it.* —Helen Keller

Sometimes tragedies actually bring out the best in people. Have you noticed how people get together and help one another so much more easily when they're in the midst of a disaster? Tragedies can bring together neighbors who had previously hardly even bothered to say hello to one another.

Tragedies and disasters have a way of shaking off many layers of illusion-based distractions to reveal a deeper awareness of the shared flame of humanity. Natural and manmade disasters, such as floods, tornados, hurricanes, terrorist bombings, and earthquakes, all bring (along with images of devastation) equally powerful portrayals of human beings helping and even heroically saving others.

Here are some ways that suffering can uplift your spirit:

- Suffering inspires humility, vulnerability, and openness.
- Suffering teaches compassion and kindness.
- Suffering brings greater appreciation and gratitude for all you have.
- Suffering guides you to contemplate and reconsider your thoughts and actions.
- Suffering encourages renunciation — an important quality for spiritual growth.
- Suffering inspires you to pray and ask for divine grace.

Many people have awakened to religion, spirituality, and the presence of God for the first time after going through traumatic events. In fact, suffering can be one of the most potent forces for spiritual transformation and awakening. I know that may not be exactly what you wanted to hear!

### **Be Careful**

Understanding the benefits that can come from suffering shouldn't make you start courting difficulties or becoming a martyr who looks for more suffering to grow from. Nor should you just suffer on and on without making efforts to heal the problems in your life. In fact, with spiritual awareness, you can remove unnecessary discomforts not only through outer efforts, but also by combining the power of your mind with spiritual practices, good actions, and higher intentions.

## Spiritual Wisdom

### Wise words about the trials of life

Great teachers from many traditions have pointed out how valuable life's trials can be for one who is seeking to grow from them. Here are a few of their views on this topic:

“Tragedy is like a strong acid — it dissolves away all but the very gold of truth.”

—D.H. Lawrence

“Sorrow makes a man think of God.”

—Ramana Maharshi

“Suffering is not an evil, it is the consequence and nearly always the remedy of evil.”

—Eliphas Levi

“The soul that is without suffering does not feel the need of knowing the ultimate cause of the universe.”

—Anandamayi Ma

“Love your suffering. Do not resist it, do not flee from it. Give yourself to it. It is only your aversion that hurts, nothing else.”

—Hermann Hesse

“Never to suffer would have been never to have been blessed.”

—Edgar Allan Poe

## Recognizing That There Are No Mistakes

A water bearer in Nepal had two large pots that he would carry to the river to fill with water every day. Each water pot hung on the end of a pole, which balanced across his shoulders. One of the pots was perfect and always delivered a full measure of water at the end of the long walk from the river to the water bearer's house. The other one had a crack and would arrive only half-full.

One day, the leaking pot spoke to the water bearer, saying, “I feel that I should apologize to you.”

“Why?” asked the gentle man.

The leaky pot explained, “During these past two years, I have only been able to deliver half my load because this crack in my side causes the water to leak out all the way back to the house. Because of my flaw, you do all this work without receiving the full value from your efforts.”

The water bearer felt compassion for the old cracked pot and told it, “As we return to my house, I want you to notice the beautiful flowers along the path.”

Indeed, as they went up the hill, the faulty pot took notice of the beautiful wild flowers on one side of the path. When they arrived at his house, the man asked the leaky pot, “Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of the path, but not on the other pot’s side? That’s because I’ve always known your flaw and put it to good use. I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day as we walk back from the river, you water them. For two years I’ve been able to enjoy these beautiful flowers. Without your being just the way you are, there would have been so much less beauty in my life. Thank you, my friend.”

### Consider

Sometimes making a mistake ends up being the perfect thing for your spiritual evolution. In some cases, you may have to make a big mistake before you can truly grow and become free from whatever incorrect ideas had been motivating many other mistaken thoughts and actions.

When you make mistakes or lose yourself in anger, fear, or whatever contracted emotions push you out of your equanimity and self-control, there is always a new opportunity for growth. It may hurt oh so bad! You may not want to make the shift to see the lessons behind a painful event. Sometimes it is easier to complain, blame someone, or put yourself down than to do the real work of respectful self-examination.

Yet, the opportunity is there, waiting for you to make the leap — waiting for you to see your weakness and make internal (and, if need be, external) changes. What’s important in any situation is your own growth. How can you learn humility, detachment, love, and faith? How can you use this breakdown to open up into another great breakthrough?

## It’s Not Punishment, but Guidance

*Q: How do we experience painful circumstances without becoming embittered by them?*

*A: By seeing them as lessons and not as retribution. Trust life, my friends. However far afield life seems to take you, this trip is necessary. You have come to transverse a wide terrain of experience in order to verify where truth lies and where your distortion is in that terrain. You will then be able to return to your home center, your soul self, refreshed and wiser.*

—Emmanuel (as channeled by Pat Rodegast)



Here's an analogy for one way to look at what may appear to be punishments from God or the universe. Imagine that you have a little dog that you really love, but your beloved pooch frequently chews up your socks. You aren't really angry with your sweet pup, and you even may think it's cute how he looks up at you with a guilty face and pieces of shredded sock in his paws. Nevertheless, you have to feign anger enough to communicate to your pup that he shouldn't chew up any more socks.

Still, even while you're yelling "No!" or giving the pup a gentle swat on the nose, you are still loving him and wishing you could be cuddling instead of training him. But you know that if you kept smiling and petting your little friend, he wouldn't understand that his behavior needed to change. If you don't let your pup know that what he's doing is wrong, then you may end up with a closet filled with shredded socks and a grown dog who has moved on to chewing bigger and more expensive things.

If the puppy gets your message right away and changes his incorrect behavior after just a tiny chastisement, then everyone can go back to sweetness and cuddling very quickly. However, if the little dog doesn't get the message and continues to chew up your socks, then you have to continue to be forceful in punishing and training him.

In the same way, when you seek to be in harmony with the universe by paying attention to the many avenues of divine guidance that are available inside and out, then you are more likely to do what is right and less likely to "chew up any socks." When you do more of what is right and less of what is harmful, you draw to yourself fewer negative results and less chastisement from a universe that is not so much punishing as guiding you to be your best.

### **Trust is the key**

When you ride one of those space blaster, thriller, rollercoaster rides, it's your trust that transforms what could have been an extremely scary and traumatic experience into fun. Try going on the same rollercoaster ride after being told that ten significant bolts have been removed from its structure.

In the same way, trusting God and the eternal perfection behind this visible universe makes the ups and downs of your life-ride less scary and more fun.

## Transforming Challenge into Ecstasy

### Spiritual Wisdom

*The heart, like the grape, is prone to delivering its harvest in the same moment it appears to be crushed.*

—Roger Housden

Some ancient philosophies from India describe intense emotions, such as great joy and paralyzing fear, as potent opportunities to break free from the world of illusion and move into a higher awareness.

One scripture called the *Spanda Karikas* explains that during experiences of vehement anger, surprise, and fear, your mind automatically stops. These moments are some of the best times to focus your attention inside yourself with the intention of gaining entrance into the background consciousness behind your thoughts. This practice of vigilance in the midst of emotional challenge can help you grasp the ecstatic experience of supreme reality that exists behind all the illusions of worldly life.

One example given in this scripture is of someone who is running for his life from an elephant — a more likely event in ancient India than it is in modern societies! Picture this person, though. An elephant is running after him. The fellow is running for his life, and while that's happening, he remembers the greater vision of universal reality and shifts into a spiritual awareness beyond the running, beyond the fear, and beyond thought. He becomes identified with the witness who is dreaming the dream of his life.

### ***Weathering the storms***

With spiritual eyes, everything is a gift from God — even those terrible moments of deep inner suffering when you wish you didn't exist. Such times may be blessing you by clearing out your soul and washing you clean with tears of grief to prepare a proper space for more divine spirit to come into your life.

Imagine that you've spent your life living out in a field, dealing with occasional fluctuations of elements. One day, a big, terrible hurricane comes through, forcing you to seek shelter to save your life.

While running, you find a small, abandoned hut that you had never noticed, and you go inside the hut to stay safe from the storm. The great news is that after the storm ends, you'll still have that newly discovered hut to live in!

## ***This, too, shall pass***

One day King Solomon decided to humble his most trusted minister, Benaiah ben Yehoyada. He said to the minister, “Benaiah, there is a certain ring that I want you to bring to me. I wish to wear it for the holiday of Sukkot, so you have six months to find it.”

“If it exists anywhere on earth, your majesty,” replied Benaiah, “I will find it and bring it to you. But what makes the ring you seek so special?”

“I want a ring that has magic powers,” answered the king. “If a happy man looks at it, he becomes sad, and if a sad man looks at it, he becomes happy.” King Solomon knew that no such ring existed in the world, but he wanted to give his minister a little taste of humility.

Spring passed and then summer, and still Benaiah was unable to find such a ring anywhere, though he searched high and low throughout the land. On the night before Sukkot, Benaiah decided to take a walk in one of the poorest quarters of Jerusalem. There, he passed by an old merchant who had begun to set out the day’s wares on a shabby carpet. “Have you by any chance heard of a magic ring that makes the happy wearer forget his joy and the broken-hearted wearer forget his sorrows?” asked Benaiah.

He watched the old merchant take a plain gold ring from his carpet and engrave something on it. When Benaiah read the words on the ring, his face broke out in a wide smile.

That night, the entire city welcomed in the holiday of Sukkot with great festivity. “Well, my friend,” asked King Solomon, “have you found what I sent you after?” All the ministers laughed and Solomon himself smiled.

To everyone’s surprise, Benaiah held up a small gold ring and declared, “Here it is, your majesty! This ring will make a happy man sad and a sad man happy.”

As soon as Solomon read the inscription, the smile vanished from his face. The merchant had inscribed three Hebrew letters on the gold band: gimel, zayin, yud, which began the words “*Gam zeh ya’avor*” — “This, too, shall pass.”

At that moment, Solomon realized that all his fabulous wealth and tremendous power were fleeting, and that one day he and all he owned would be nothing but dust.

King Solomon’s quest to humble Benaiah had taught both Benaiah and Solomon an important and humbling lesson: Everything in this world is temporary. Whatever is happening in life — whether easy or hard, happy or sad, pleasant or unpleasant — shall pass. Good times will pass, and troubling times will pass. Remembering this truth during the good times helps to keep you focused on deeper aspects of life; and remembering that all things shall pass during difficult times gives you the hope and strength to persevere and turn your troubles into triumphs.