

# Looking Down

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The expression looking down is very expressive of what I am doing when I get caught up with my suffering and despair. When something goes wrong in my life, I just keep looking at the mess and not seeing much else. That is looking down, all I see is what is wrong.

Rev. Master Jiyu used to tell people who looked like they were down in the dumps and feeling miserable, that they needed to look up. When someone is having a hard time, they often literally keep their eyes downcast. However, looking up is not just raising our eyes but directing our attention towards the Buddha, looking at where we are going in our spiritual life. It is very easy to be completely absorbed and lost in what is happening right now. It astonishes me how I can be so fully absorbed with my troubles, my worries, my fears. My problems can fill my life and color everything. In looking down, we focus on what is lacking, what appears to be getting in our way.

I did not understand for a long time that looking down also means to be absorbed in my joys and my pleasures. I can fill myself with the wonders and pleasures of life. There is nothing wrong with enjoying something but Buddhism teaches, wherever we look, we should see impermanence. Let's say I am enjoying a delicious meal or pleasurable company. I should see it as an unimportant, fleeting pleasure. When I encounter something attractive, I need to cultivate nonattachment-it is no big deal, nothing special. The Buddhist path is seeing the emptiness of both worldly joy and worldly suffering: to see the dreamlike and insignificant nature of the ups and downs of our daily life. When I encounter something that raises aversion, worry, fear or anger, I should see it as Buddha and work on patience and compassion for this piece of difficult karma. When I meet something that seems neutral, something I do not seem to care about, I need to work on bowing to it and see both its sacred nature and its pure emptiness. When I approach my daily life in this way, everything becomes open and positive, everything points me to the Bodhicitta, the boundless heart of Buddha.

Instead of using the expression looking up, I like to think of it more as looking forward, looking for my next step on the path to Buddhahood. Instead of getting completely caught up with this little self, the drama of our life's story, with its triumphs and failures, a Buddhist takes refuge in the Three Treasures. The Three Treasures are the heart of Buddhism and a vehicle of liberation. For me, looking up means to maintain equanimity with the endless ups and downs of my daily life and to put my effort and heart into taking the next step forward on the Buddhist Way.

When I take refuge in the Buddha, I am saying everything I want, everything my heart desires, is not found in this world of change but is only found in the depths of my heart, in this place of peace and stillness. When I open my heart with kindness and compassion to whatever I encounter, I find everything has brightness and everything has goodness. The Boundless exists within all of us and is our True Heart. Finding that place is our deepest and most fundamental longing. When I take refuge in the Buddha, I am pointing myself to that completeness and to a fearlessness that knows that nothing can ever be fundamentally hurt.

When I take refuge in the Dharma, I am saying that all I need to do is follow the teachings of the Buddha and everything will be taken care of. The Dharma is telling me to purify my heart and let everything go, so taking refuge in the Dharma is seeing what I am holding, what I am demanding, what I am asking for, and focusing my heart and mind on doing only what the **Buddhist Precepts** and my **mindfulness** directs me to do. When I encounter obstacles or suffering, I need to let go of my expectations and desires, and trust that there is no problem, that everything is complete right now. All acceptance is the key to the gateless gate. I am not taking refuge in the Dharma when something in me is believing, "This is unacceptable, this is wrong." When these doubts arise, I need to compassionately embrace them like a mother soothing an upset child, giving the Dharma like medicine to my upset or frightened heart. I need to keep reminding myself, there is no problem. Every step I take on the Buddhist Way is leading me to my Real Home.

Taking refuge in the Sangha is the key in keeping my Buddhist training going and most importantly, keeping it going in the right direction. Trust is the ground of the Sangha Treasure. To trust a senior member of the Sangha; to be willing to be open about what you are experiencing, your difficulties, your doubts. This openness is based on a trust that there is nothing wrong with us, nothing we need to hide. I have often felt I need to keep some of my difficulties and failings secret because I was ashamed of them. I would think that I know what I need to do, it seems so obvious and I will be open about myself after I have changed. Yet it was so liberating when I was willing to be open with someone I could trust and talk about my dark, secret messes. Then I could see myself through the reflection of much wiser eyes that had compassion for my struggles and still saw a pure heart within me. Also, it is very deluded for me to think I always know the right direction. The deep wisdom of the Sangha can point me in the right direction when I go astray. This experience and wisdom is what allows me to trust my next step since I know that if I am mistaken in my training, the Sangha will see my mistakes and will help me to find my way back on the Path.

One common form of delusion is the feeling we are special and unique. Whenever I feel ashamed or believe that there is something is wrong with me, I can look around and see how I am like everyone else, struggling with my passions and fears in this very difficult world. To let go of my efforts to be someone special frees me to put my efforts into following the Dharma.

The Sangha Refuge is also the willingness to be with others, to put up with and learn to trust and love the ordinary, flawed people that comprise the Sangha. My heart often opens to the immeasurable gift of having the company and the support of all these varied members of the Sangha, all walking the Path to Buddhahood with me.

I still find it very easy to look down and can find myself dwelling on what is wrong with me, wrong with others, wrong with the world. Letting go is the Way yet letting go can sometimes feel so hard it appears impossible. In the mind of the Bosatsu who is truly one, the obstacles dissolve. I need to just keep coming back to the stillness

within my heart, to just accepting, to stop asking for things to be different, and then the Way opens. Sometimes it appears as a little glimmer of light in the darkness. Sometimes just as a sense that this suffering on which I dwell is not completely real. Sometimes the problems completely fall away, and I look with astonishment that I have so enveloped my life with darkness in the midst of such overwhelming light.